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Cross-Roads.

Polish Studies in Culture,
Literary Theory, and History

Edited by Ryszard Nycz
and Teresa Walas

Andrzej Zawadzki
Literature and Weak Thought



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Preface

Literature and Weak Thought consists of four parts. In the first part I reconstruct the fundamental philosophical assumptions of so-called “weak thought,” which has been shaped in particular by two thinkers – Constantin Noica and Gianni Vattimo – both of whom remain little known and seldom discussed in Poland. In spite of various differences between their philosophical styles, historical experiences and political views, these two thinkers are linked by a characteristic inclination that in my opinion might be regarded as the essential feature of modern philosophical, artistic and literary sensibilities. This inclination involves focusing particular attention on all that is existentially fragile, deficient, crippled or defective, as well as the formation of a point of departure for philosophical and cultural reflections on the basis of these areas of experience. From weak thought I also adopt the idea that the way in which weak being, or perhaps “weakened” being, manifests itself can be best expressed by using the concept of the trace (just as in colloquial language we speak of “trace” quantities of certain substances).

In the second part, on literary theory, I propose the employment of motifs from weak thought – particularly the idea of the trace – in an attempt to reinterpret certain fundamental concepts of poetics. Firstly, there is the concept of mimesis, or imitation, treated here as a kind of tracing, with particular emphasis placed precisely on the question of the trace.¹ Secondly, I address the concept of the textual subject as trace, or track, with all the meanings inherent in these words, including among others the fundamental characteristics allowing for the identification or differentiation of a person (facial features or “traits”), the creation of a *portrait* or picture (drawing, tracing, *portraying*), as well as damage, deficiency and defectiveness (marks or traces).² I propose that the

1 Translator’s Note: The Polish word for “imitation” (“*naśladowanie*”) contains the word for “trace” (*ślad*) within it. Therefore, “imitation” already includes a concept of “tracing.” This connection cannot be so naturally implied in English.

2 Translator’s Note: The Polish text refers to the “*ślad-ryśa*,” meaning literally “trace-scratch” (which I have translated here as “trace, or track”). In fact, Zawadzki’s argument consistently alludes to certain connotations of – and connections between – these two words in Polish. These semantic links do not exist in the same manner in English. The Polish “*ślad*” may be translated as “trace,” “mark,” “track,” “trail,” “vestige,” or even “print.” “*Ryśa*” may be translated as “scratch,” “crack,” “rift,” or “flaw.” Another related word, “*ryś*,” may be translated as “trait,” “feature,” or “outline.” The verb “*rysować*” means “to draw,” “to depict” or “to portray.” In my translation of these terms, I draw heavily on etymological connections between “trace,” “track,” “trait,” “portray” and “portrait” (all stemming from the Latin *tractus* and *trahere*) in order to bring out these important associations as clearly as possible.

“poetics of the trace” – for this is the term I propose to use – be considered as a crucial tradition within the current of modern and especially late-modern reflections on the status of the literary work, on its form, on poetic language, and on the fundamental categories used to describe it.

The third part of the book is concerned with literary history. Here I attempt to reconstruct and describe – without claiming to possess any complete or entirely coherent perspective – those tendencies in modern literature in which the intuition of “weak” being has most fully expressed itself in various ways and by diverse artistic means. In the most general terms, this intuition is that of a reality that has lost its substantiality and essentiality. It is most frequently expressed by the motif of the trace in its various different meanings: as the imprint, the remnant, the sign-message. It constitutes the essential thread of thought – though it is by no means easy to uncover or analyze – in the creative work of such writers as Roman Jaworski, Bolesław Leśmian, Witold Gombrowicz, Tadeusz Różewicz and Tadeusz Kantor, to name but a few of the most important “protagonists” from this part of my study. It also appears that this “weak reality” and its trace-like mode of existence gains even greater significance in Polish literature after 1989. For instance, we might mention the work of Magdalena Tulli, Andrzej Stasiuk, and Stefan Chwin, as well as Olga Tokarczuk and Jacek Podsiadły³ (whom I do not discuss here). This allows us to formulate a tentative thesis about the existence of a distinct current in modern literature (and one that is parallel, as it were, with “weak poetics” understood as immanent poetological reflections in the sphere of modern aesthetics) concentrated on the question of the trace in various contexts – ontological, existential and cultural.

The final part takes the form of an appendix. Here I analyze three metaphors for mimesis that can be found in modern literature, but also in philosophy: the metaphors of dance, mime and the ornament. In my view they constitute an important interpretive context for the question of the trace and of imitation (or tracing). The modern crisis of mimeticism as imitation or copying has led to attempts by modern writers to turn to older, pre-modern models of mimeticism and to evoke the original meanings of mimesis, which have been unacknowledged or marginalized as result of the dominance of the imitative model. Among these models, two are very common in modern literature: dance and mime. These refer to a participatory mimesis understood not as copying, recreating or representation, but as lively, dynamic participation in the

3 G. Koziółek has written about the question of the trace in Podsiadły’s work in an unpublished undergraduate thesis entitled *Ślady transcendencji w poezji Jacka Podsiadły* (defended at the Jagiellonian University, Krakow in 2009).

movement of the world (dance) or as its direct and “natural” manifestation (mime). However, both metaphors take on an ambivalent character in the modern context: they express a yearning for a choreic order or a unity of the world and the human being, while also emphasizing their disintegration and utopian nature. They tantalize us with the hope of creating a living presence, while also revealing the “conjuring tricks” of its artificial and conventional nature. The third of the metaphors distinguished here – the ornament – illustrates the place where the various orders of mimeticism overlap or interpenetrate one another, thus indicating its paradoxical or even aporetic aspects.

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 nihilismo.” 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 (*indecidibilita*), 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 Romanianness. 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.

times, his reflections anticipate contemporary thought, even if the language of his writings sometimes seems far removed from the jargon of contemporary culture. Certainly one might read Noica as a Romanian philosopher, but he might also be interpreted as a universal philosopher, if the Romanian roots of his thought are de-emphasized. I feel the strongest affinity with an interpretation combining both perspectives, and showing that, in fact, there is no need to make such a choice. The universality of Noica's thought springs precisely from his localness, which is profoundly meditated and creatively exploited.

In spite of the undoubted influence of Heidegger on Noica, the philosophical development of the author of *Devenirea întru ființa* moved in the opposite direction to that of the author of *Being and Time*. Specifically, Noica's career began with freer works, in which philosophical problems were often linked with reflections on language, culture, art, literature, folklore, and which were sometimes close to the form of the essay or other genres on the border of philosophy and literature (here we might point to two philosophical diaries, *Jurnal filosofic* and *Jurnal de idei*, and to a volume of essays, *Eseuri de dumenica*). Later, the Romanian philosopher arrived at a personal summa of his views, and the crowning achievement of his intellectual path, in the expansive treatise *Devenirea întru ființa*, which takes the form of a systematic exposition in ontology and constitutes perhaps the last large-scale, comprehensive undertaking in the first philosophy of the twentieth century.

The second of these two thinkers, Gianni Vattimo, is currently one of the best known representatives of hermeneutical philosophy, a distinguished scholar and commentator of Nietzsche and Heidegger, to whom he has devoted several important books (including *Essere storia e linguaggio in Heidegger*, 1963; *Il soggetto e la maschera. Nietzsche e il problema della liberazione*, 1974; *Dialogo con Nietzsche. Saggi 1961-2000*, 2000; and the popular *Introduzione a Nietzsche* and *Introduzione a Heidegger*, both published in 1994). The philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger – as well as, to a slightly lesser degree, Gadamer – is also the main source of inspiration for Vattimo's other works, in which he addresses the fundamental issues at the heart of almost all areas of philosophy. Indeed, the Italian thinker's interests include social philosophy (*La società trasparente*, 1989), philosophy of religion (*Credere di credere*, 1996; *Dopa la cristianità*, 2002), ontology and epistemology, ancient and avant-garde aesthetics (*Il concetto di fare in Aristotele*, 1961; *Poesia e ontologia*, 1967), ethics, as well as the history of philosophy, especially its hermeneutical current (*Schleiermacher, filosofo dell'interpretazione*, 1968). In *The End of Modernity (La fine della modernità*, 1985) and *Oltre interpretazione: Il significato dell'ermeneutica per la filosofia* (1994), Vattimo makes original use of the "radical" hermeneutics of Nietzsche and Heidegger to describe modernity, as

well as postmodernity, thus characterizing its mode of experiencing being, its thinking about subjectivity and the status it has granted to science and art. Vattimo has remained faithful to his two patrons from the beginning of his intellectual path right up until its most recent phases, though this faithfulness has had, one might say, a rather stormy history, with various faces and various phases.

Of course it is difficult at the present moment to view Vattimo's philosophy as a closed and completed whole. Nevertheless, we can perhaps differentiate certain fundamental threads within it, as well as the basic stages in its evolution. From this point of view, *The End of Modernity (La fine della modernità)* – published in 1985 and translated into many languages, including English, Polish, German, French, Romanian and Portuguese – plays a decisive role in Vattimo's philosophical development. In *Le avventure della differenza* (1980), Vattimo was quite clearly still wavering between – to invoke the title of one of the book's chapters – dialectical reason (*ragione dialettica*) and hermeneutical reason (*ragione ermeneutica*); he was thus both underlining his distance from contemporary, or post-Heideggerian hermeneutic thought, as well as from post-structuralism, and trying to combine inspirations coming from the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger with elements taken from the philosophy of Sartre, among others.

Already in *Al di là del soggetto* (1981), one can observe distinct signs of a “hermeneutic turn” in Vattimo's thought, the expression of which is the clear transferral of the burden of the philosopher's interests towards the nihilistic ontology of Nietzsche and Heidegger, which from then on will constitute the main source of his inspiration. In *The End of Modernity* and other later books, the inspiration of existentialism – or, more broadly, of dialectical thought – distinctly weakens, or at least undergoes significant reevaluation and transformation, although Vattimo's work retains some elements of dialectical thought. However, in *The End of Modernity*, the philosopher rejects, or at least marginalizes, those threads in the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger that might bring these thinkers closer to existential and dialectical philosophy. Instead, he accents the threads that allow them to appear as thinkers positioned at the end of modernity and the beginning of postmodernity – in other words, those threads that he requires for his own interpretation of a culture he describes as “late-modern.”

The ideas contained within *The End of Modernity* make Vattimo one of the most important voices in the broad discussion of modernity and postmodernity that was in progress in the 1970s and 1980s in philosophy, the social sciences and literary studies, with the participation of such thinkers as Habermas, Lyotard

and Rorty. We certainly find in Vattimo's views many *loci communes* with this discussion, but also many of his own solutions and original interpretations.

The End of Modernity does not take the form of a comprehensive or systematic exposition, but rather that of a collection of sketches and essays written over the course of several years – the majority of which had been published separately in various periodicals and edited volumes. This makes the book more difficult to read, and impedes the full and precise reconstruction of the philosopher's views: Vattimo frequently repeats themes, returns to the same or similar problems, though he treats them slightly differently on each occasion, always looking at them from a slightly altered perspective. Nor do we find in *The End of Modernity* any comprehensive, systematic or detailed theory of modernity as a philosophical, social or cultural system, nor any reflections concerning its beginning, rise and development. Instead, Vattimo tends to provide a range of "insights," "snap-shots," "thought projections," through which he elucidates and focuses on various aspects of modernity and postmodernity. This mode of advancing his argument is perhaps characteristic for the entire philosophical oeuvre of the author of *The Transparent Society*.

However, in books published after *The End of Modernity* – such as *Etica dell'interpretazione*, *Oltre l'interpretazione*, and the well-known article, "Dialectics, Difference and Weak Thought," which presents the general assumptions of so-called weak thinking, the concept perhaps most strongly associated with the name of the Italian philosopher – Vattimo develops, expands upon and deepens the questions raised in his earlier books. Only at the end of the 1990s would a certain novelty enter Vattimo's interests, the expression of which are two well-known and now widely discussed books devoted to religion: *Credere di credere* (1996) and *Dopo la cristianità* (2002). Nevertheless, in Vattimo's case it is difficult to talk about this "religious turn" as a radical turning point, since in his reflections on the phenomenon of faith, a fundamental role is still played by problems with which he was previously concerned, such as modernity or interpretation. Vattimo's thought develops more as evolution than as revolution, a mode perhaps best described by the metaphor of the spiral, which also bears an affinity with Noica's thought. Vattimo's work continually circles around certain central and fundamental problems, but it deepens, reinterprets and recontextualizes them, constantly describing new and broader rings, constantly catching hold of new problem areas.

A common feature of the philosophical reflections of Vattimo and Noica is the attempt to capture and describe those ways of experiencing being that evade the traditional categories of metaphysics, especially in its modern variants. The two thinkers set down common aims in their works and reach similar results in their diagnoses and analyses: to undermine and question modernity, or rather a

particular version of modernity considered to be dominant, as well as its fundamental categories. Among these categories are the following: the favored position of the knowing subject; epistemology as a tool of re-presentation guaranteeing the subject's domination over being treated as fully present and accessible to cognitive operations; dialectics as an instrument of consolidation and totalization, serving to abolish the isolation of the individual; the idea of the project, or even projectivity, understood both as a movement of thought imposing comprehensive, ordering categories on reality or as ideational-interpretive grids giving reality meaning, but also as the ability to create emancipatory, utopian social projects; and finally, modern science and technology as instruments for human domination of the world, giving human beings the hope of surpassing the many inconvenient limitations once considered as natural in traditional, premodern definitions of humanity and also of surpassing a human nature understood as a stable, unchanging essence.

Vattimo and Noica reach similar conclusions in many respects on the subject of the nature of modernity and its limitations, though they take rather different paths to get there. Vattimo views modernity from the perspective of its end or decline – in other words, from the perspective of a post- or even ultra-modernity, from which a critique of modernity is now possible, as well as a kind of genealogy (to speak in Nietzsche's language) or archeology (to use Foucault's term), revealing its deep foundations and conditions. He attempts to directly challenge the fundamental and central assumptions of the discourse of modernity, as well as the main currents of this tradition, in which, after all, he is strongly rooted, and which he therefore sees from within. His critique of modernity is not devoid of a certain elegiac note – a chronicle of the immanent evolution and transformations that modernity has undergone, leading inescapably to the breakdown of its hard core and to the decline of its dominant, heroic version. Vattimo looks critically and, at the same time, nostalgically at the heritage of modernity that he shares; after all, he is a legitimate heir to that heritage. For Vattimo, the concept of weak thought is above all an attempt to diagnose the state of contemporary Western European culture and the definite, historical moment in which this culture and the structures created by it find themselves. The opposition of strong thought and weak thought in Vattimo's work above all bears a temporal character, as an opposition between the philosophical project of modernity and late modernity, while "weakening" itself (either of being or of thought) is a historical event (in the sense of the Heideggerian term "*Ereignis*").

Things are rather different with Noica. In his critique of modernity, he refers to pre-modern sources and traditions, especially native traditions, such as the philosophical – or perhaps rather "wisdom-literature" – treatises of Neagoe

Basarab (from the beginning of the sixteenth century) or Dimitrie Cantemir (from the beginning of the eighteenth century). This gesture of a return to the origins, or a retrieval of them, quite apart from their concrete character, takes on the somewhat mythologized form of the reconstructing of an ethno-archaic ontology. This also means reconstructing a specific, linguistically and culturally conditioned vision of reality and the experience of being contained within that ontology – in other words, to quote the title of a book by Mircea Vulcănescu (another thinker contemporary with Noica), “the Romanian dimension of existence.”¹⁰ Noica looks at modernity from the perspective of everything that is marginal and peripheral to it. He attempts to justify the difference and value of a culture which entered the orbit of modernity late and which was still deeply rooted in pre-modern structures of thought. Thus, apart from the Heideggerian inspiration most apparent in the treatment of speech as the horizon on which being “gives itself” to experience, a Romantic inspiration is also clearly present in Noica’s thought. This inspiration is particularly visible in the treatment of language as an expression of the spirituality, character and mentality of a nation. From this point of view, Noica’s thought may be linked with various projects to define the essence of Romanianness and its particular vision of the world, man and culture, such as Lucian Blaga’s “mioritic space,” or Constantina Rădulescu-Motru’s concept of “*etnicul românesc*” [Romanian ethnicity].¹¹ Therefore, in Noica’s work, the opposition of strong thought and weak thought takes on a “spatial” character, as an opposition of Western and Romanian visions of being. The historical dimension of thought, so crucial for Vattimo, is less strongly accented in Noica’s work, though the critique of modernity and its basic assumptions forms the hidden dimension of his philosophy.

Both Noica and Vattimo use – though in different ways, in different senses and with different aims – the metaphor of “weakness” in such concepts as weak ontology, weak thought, weak being, the weak idea of being, the weakening of the categories of being. They do so in order to describe a type of ontological and epistemological experience that remains in clear opposition to its “strong” form, identified with modernity and the categories developed by modernity. Therefore, Noica’s “ethnic” ontology, when read in the context of Vattimo’s interpretation of weak thought, shows a slightly different face and may be interpreted as a crucial stage in twentieth-century ontological reflection, anticipating many contemporary trends in thought. From this point of view, two problems deserve

10 See: Vulcănescu, Mircea, *Dimensiunea românească a existenței* (București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1991).

11 See: Blaga, Lucian, *Opere, 9, Trilogia culturii* (București: Editura Minerva, 1985); Rădulescu-Motru, Constantin, *Etnicul românesc* (București: Editura Albatros, 1996).

particular emphasis. The idea of weakness in Noica's work, first of all, serves as a critique of a metaphysical conception of being as presence with an absolute and solemn character. Secondly, it is not merely a point of departure for philosophical reflection, but also a true "philosophia prima," in which, after all, the place of being as basis, ground, foundation is occupied by a fragile, defective, weakened being: "Only by coming out of a weakened being may one understand what being is."¹²

Noica: The Romanian Fragility of Being

Noica's philosophy clearly deserves an exhaustive and thorough analysis, a deep discussion of all its aspects, for which there is no space here.¹³ Therefore, by necessity, I am limiting the subject of this outline to the idea of weakness, or weakening, in the meanings and contexts in which it appears in the writings of the Romanian philosopher. I shall only refer to other questions to the extent that they are associated with the problem of weak ontology, even if these are matters of fundamental significance for the author's conception as a whole. In Noica's books, reflections on the subject of weakness do not take on the character of a developed or comprehensive idea – as is the case with Vattimo – but rather they function as various intuitions and remarks, which are scattered throughout various books and not always interrelated, thus presenting a certain difficulty in reconstructing and interpreting them. However, the question itself – though problematized in various ways – interested the philosopher from as early as the

12 Noica, Constantin, *Devenirea întru ființa. Incercare asupra filozofiei traditionale. Tratat de ontologie. Scrisori despre logica lui Hermes* (București: Editura Humaitas, 1998), p. 276.

13 In my discussion of Noica's philosophy, I have made use of the following works: Dur, Ion, *Noica-între dandism și mitul școlii* (București: Editura Eminescu, 1994); Grădineanu, Mihail, *Noica. Modelul ontologic* (Iași: Editura Septentrion, 1994); Guliciuc, Emilia, *Constantin Noica sau revolta întru spirit* (București: Editura Didactica și Pedagogica, 1999) ; Pamfil, Laura, *Noica : de la uitarea ființei la reamintirea ei* (București, 2003). The political contexts of Noica's ontology is discussed in: Laignel-Lavastine, Alexandra, *Filozofie și naționalism. Paradoxul Noica* (București: Humanitas, 1998); and Lavric, Sorin, *Noica și mișcarea legionară* (București: Humanitas, 2007). The Polish reception of Noica's work includes: Kania, Ireneusz, "Wstęp" ("Introduction"), Constantin Noica, *Sześć chorób ducha współczesnego*, trans. I. Kania (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1997); Nowak, Piotr, "Zespół Noiki," *Literatura na świecie* 9/10 (2004); Sieroń-Gałusek, Dorota, "Dar ciągłości: idee i instytucje w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej z perspektywy długiego trwania," *Edukacja Humanistyczna* 2 (2007); Błęsznowski, Bartłomiej, "Źródła paidei Constantina Noiki," *Po lekcjach* 34 (2009).

1940s (*Pagini despre sufletul românesc*, 1944) through the 1970s (*Rostirea filozofică românească*, 1970) and 1980s (*Devenirea întru ființa*).

Unlike Vattimo, Noica used the formulations of weakness and weakening exclusively in an ontological context with the aim of describing certain characteristics of being. I propose to distinguish three basic stages in the development of the concept of weak ontology in Noica's work. In the first stage, the dominant tone is that of religious meditation on the world and on human beings: for instance, in the early essays from a collection entitled *Pagini despre sufletul românesc*. In these essays, weakness – but also softness – is presented as a characteristic feature of the epistemological categories worked out by traditional Romanian culture and by its vision of the world. Thus “it is not man who thinks the world, but the world that thinks in man. Man is not a subject, but a part. Intellect [*spiritul*, also meaning soul or mind] is not situated *in front of* [*în fața*] the world, while the world does not want to be seen or understood, but rather completed. In this Romanian vision we find a *gentle continuity between nature and the soul*. With us there is a peculiar and in a certain sense unphilosophical yearning for harmony,” writes the philosopher in a sketch entitled “Cum gândește poporul roman.”¹⁴ Therefore, man and the world, thought and reality, are not two essentially different or opposed substances, but rather two sides of the same process that is existence. There is no place here for a dualism of the subject and the object, nor for an epistemological relation understood as the re-presentation of things, as the “construction and simple imposition” of human projects and grids of categories upon things, as the apprehension of things in the categories of the meanings they have for consciousness. Reflecting on the semantics of such more or less synonymous terms as *sens*, *tâlc*, *rost*, *înțeleș*, *noima* (the latter term originating in the Greek *noema*) – denoting, more or less, “meaning,” “idea,” “explanation” – Noica notes their curious “weakening.” These terms refer neither to full or certain knowledge, nor to the act of retrieving it, but rather to partial, incomplete comprehension, perhaps even incomprehension, and thus a comprehension before which being simultaneously reveals and conceals itself, “gives” itself, and escapes. Ideas or meanings are not the ideas and meanings of things (*al lucrului*), nor are they categories projected on them from outside (*despre lucru*), but rather they are inherent in the things themselves (*în lucru*). Thought, on the other hand, descends to things, or edges towards them (*către lucru*).¹⁵

14 Noica, Constantin, *Pagini despre sufletul românesc* (București: Editura Humanitas, 2000), p. 84.

15 *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81.

In his commentary on the old Romanian treatise *lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie*, Noica points to its lack of any epistemological questions, so important to the “Faustian” man of the West. Epistemological consciousness is not a tool allowing for the attainment of harmony and unification with the world, while this is precisely the aim advanced by the author of *Învățăturile*. On the other hand, this is not an ethical discourse either – in the sense of a moral act – viewed in the categories of rational and imperative ethics, which assume the existence of an active subject who takes conscious responsibility and makes judgments or choices. Instead of epistemology and rationalized ethics, Noica proposes the idea of *milă* as an indicator of the human being’s attitude towards reality. This concept literally means “pity” or “sympathy” in the sense of compassion, but it might also be translated as “mercy.” It assumes that humans are imperfect beings who need some reference to what is greater than them – one asks God for mercy – but it also defines the nature of the human being’s relation to the world: “our relations with the world are not based on rational good, but on mercy.”¹⁶ The human being does not strive at all costs to come to know the world and to disenchant it; neither does he build theories or projects about it, nor seek out first principles and foundations conferring uniformity upon it, nor impose meanings upon it, nor project his own norms and values upon it. Instead, the human being “descends” to the world, “compassionates” with it, and – himself imperfect – reaches out to the world’s imperfection.

I would date the second phase in the development of Noica’s weak ontology to the beginning of the 1970s, when the philosopher began to develop the concept of the weakness of being in a more complex and comprehensive manner, while his religious meditations on the world and the human being gave way to reflections on the Romanian language and the vision of reality inscribed into it, which is somewhat reminiscent of the reflections of the later Heidegger on the great concepts of metaphysics. The books *Rostirea filozofică românească* and *Sentimentul românesc al ființei* are particularly representative of this phase in Noica’s thought on ontological weakness.

The first of these two works is a conscious and very consistently pursued attempt to think through such basic philosophical categories as being, becoming, the “I,” nature, etc. in a philological light – an attempt that is both fascinating and extremely difficult to convey in translation. Noica submits his own language to reflection, not only revealing its richness, but also uncovering many unacknowledged semantic threads that reveal the original semantic intentions rooted in certain terms – from “great,” universal categories such as those mentioned above, and through to the apparently insignificant, though in fact

16 Ibid., p. 64.

strongly resonant preposition *întru* (meaning “in” or “into,” but also “towards” or “to”). His ontology will be based to a significant extent on this preposition (especially the idea of becoming “into” being, but also “towards” or “to” being – *devenirea întru ființă*). Noica discusses the philosophical meanings rooted in this preposition in several of his books, on each occasion enriching and deepening its characteristics, and finally promoting the little word *întru* to the role of a fundamental ontological category in *Devenirea întru ființa*.¹⁷

17 The preposition *întru* (I will continue to translate it as “in/towards” in order to extract its potential meanings, which Noica uses philosophically) is of fundamental importance in Noica’s whole philosophy, and a description of it would require a separate and expansive discussion. Here I must limit myself to the most basic information. This preposition, which comes from the Latin verb *intrare* – meaning “to come in” or “to enter” – also means “in” or “towards.” Therefore it can describe both a static situation (being in something, in a state or a situation) and a dynamic one (coming into or entering a state or going out towards it). Therefore it is the only adverb that can indicate not exclusively spatial but also temporal relations between things (of the type “part toward” and not “subject to object” and is associated more with the sense of touch than sight. Other Romanian adverbs, in Noica’s opinion, can be included within *întru* or constitute instances of it. The basic distinction runs between the situation of “being in” (*a fi în*) and the situation of “being into/towards” (*a fi întru*). The first expresses a situation of closure or limitation, while the second refers to a certain settling in a state that nevertheless has the potential for development, for going beyond itself, for opening up to new horizons of being. Therefore, “being in” is associated with a type of truth as certainty and exactness characteristic of modern scientific thought, while “being into/towards” founds a type of truth characteristic of humanistic studies (and therefore closer to understanding or interpretation, although Noica himself does not use these formulations in this context) concerned with questions of the soul that are into/towards values and not simply in them. The situation of “being in” shows things as being entirely self-identical with no remainder or remnant, as Noica puts it. In contrast, “being into/towards” is a situation in which things are themselves and yet go beyond themselves, thereby leaving an ontological remnant (it is conceivable that we might also define this as “difference,” which would allow us to link Noica even more strongly with the anti-dialectic current in contemporary philosophy. This remnant cannot be fully exhausted and explained in the terms of any static order or model that “being into/towards” sets into motion. In other words, a thing “being in” a situation loses its singularity and is entirely subordinated to the whole, whereas “being into/towards” constitutes an irreducible organic part of that whole, preserving its individual character.

Noica also used the adverb *întru* to differentiate two types of becoming (*devenire*) – becoming into/towards becoming (*devenire întru devenire*) and becoming into/towards being (*devenire întru ființa*) – as two fundamental aspects of existence for the world and for human beings. In the briefest outline, the first of these represents “pure” becoming, in contrast with the idea of being and in the case of the human being referring to the animal, biological dimension of human existence, the uninteruptable and ever repeating chain of life and the

According to Noica, how do the weakening (*slăbirea*) or weakness (*slăbiciunea*) of the idea of being apparent in the semantic intuitions of his native language and culture appear? Above all, the idea of being (*ființă*) does not have a strong ontological character. It is not thought as a lasting, timeless and unchanging essence strongly juxtaposed with an existence understood as the realm of adventitiousness and happenstance: “With us, being does not express essence [*esența*] – or the principle of being – at all, but rather it expresses existence, which is the act of being. It expresses actuality rather than potentiality, life rather than law, what is natural rather than what ought to be, becoming rather than permanence.”¹⁸ This intuitive experience of being finds confirmation in etymology. For the word for “being” does not originate from the verb “to be” (*a fi*), from which – for instance – the word for nature (*fire*) is derived, but rather from the Latin *feri*, meaning “to become,” similar to the Romanian *devenire*.¹⁹ The word for “being” does not contradict (*opune*) such terms as possibility, appearance, manifestation, existence, adventitiousness, or becoming, but rather combines, harmonizes and goes together (*compune*) with them.²⁰ Therefore “being” approaches the sphere that traditional metaphysical thought had separated it from with a clear and impassable boundary. An element of dynamic movement, becoming and changeability is inscribed into its linguistic and even grammatical structure. Thus there is no way of understanding this “being” through a likeness to, for instance, the Platonic world of pure ideas, which is frozen into the timelessness of the forms.

Instead, in *Creație si frumos*, Noica proves that this weakness of being, inscribed or perhaps even recorded in the experience of the Romanian language, is based on the fact that this being is constantly concealing itself, withdrawing, not allowing itself to be fully captured. The quality of being is a gradated category, if one might put this way. It has various levels of tension and it goes

rhythm of nature. Becoming into/towards being represents a situation that allows an escape from the opposition of static, essentialistic being and simple becoming. Becoming is not exhausted here in itself, but rather it attains meaning as a going beyond the new, broader (but also infinite, always open) horizons of being, which in the end is possible thanks to “being in,” the grounding in being, its materiality and even its “burden,” as Noica shows in the example of Brâncuși’s Endless Column (*Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, pp.178-183). It would be interesting to compare the two ontological situations and types of becoming with Heidegger’s distinction between the earthly and the worldly in the work of art.

18 Noica, Constantin, *Cuvânt împreună despre rostirea filozofică românească* (Bucuresti: Editura Humanitas, 1996), p. 50 (in this edition, two of Noica’s books are included under one title: *Rostirea filozofică românească* and *Creație si frumos in rostirea românească*. Quotations come from this edition).

19 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

beyond the simple oppositions of being and non-being, presence and absence: “Being has levels of truth, not the simple truth of presence and absence.”²¹ This ladder, or – as Noica says – “cascade,” of being finds its expression in the richness of the partly untranslatable conditional forms of the Romanian language, ranging from the “simple” reality of the word “is” through to various levels of possibility, possibility of possibility, adventitiousness, etc.²²

Noica’s next important step on the road to building a weak ontology is *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, a book introducing new themes into the Romanian philosopher’s earlier conceptions, but also developing those which had appeared only incidentally in *Creație și frumos*, such as his conception of the six ontological situations, based on the six modalities of the Romanian verb “to be” (*a fi*), and the identification of the weakening of being with its self-concealment or withdrawal (*retragere, ascundere*). *Sentimentul românesc al ființei* can be defined as a true treatise on weak being in the context of the ontological experience inscribed into the Romanian language, since it is perhaps in this work that Noica treats the question of ontological weakness most expansively, while the semantic field associated with the central idea is extremely rich and includes such terms as *seninitatea ființei, ușuratarea ființei, ființa neîmplinită, ființa plurală, ființa multiplicată, și ființa coruptă*.²³ Among the ways in which Noica characterizes the weakening of being, we can identify two basic interpretive trends, which are somewhat different from one another, though still closely linked. In the first of these, weakness means liberation from the burden and weight of absolute, closed and complete being in the name of a greater freedom, an openness towards possibilities of being not limited to pure presence or to the sense of what “is.” Although Noica was interested in the ontological rather than the existential level, his thought here appears to be quite close to the Heideggerian conception of the “project” as an openness to possibilities of being, thanks to which *Dasein* (for Noica it would be “being”) is something more than what it factually is – in other words, simple presence.²⁴

21 Ibid., p. 292.

22 Thus Noica attempts to create a language that would describe the “gradation” of reality, as if in reply to the claim of the narrator in Bruno Schulz’s “The Street of Crocodiles” that “Our language has no definitions that would weigh, so to speak, the grade of reality, or define its suppleness.” Cf. Schulz, Bruno, *The Fictions of Bruno Schulz: The Street of Crocodiles & Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, trans. Celina Wieniewska (New York: Picador, 1988), p. 75.

23 Noica, Constantin, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei* (București: Editura Humanitas, 1996), pp. 30, 39, 66, 72.

24 Heidegger, Martin, *Bycie i czas [Sein und Zeit]*, trans. B. Baran (Warszawa: PWN, 2004), p. 187.

The author of *Sentimentul românesc al ființei* distinguishes six ontological functions of the question and six modalities of the Romanian verb “to be” (*a fi*), which are difficult to render in all their nuanced meanings. These correspond with the six basic ontological situations. The thinking of being in the categories of the question rather than of the answer fulfills a significant ontological – not just epistemological – function in Noica’s thought. This is because, although the question manifests something essential in the order of sentences and statements, above all it leads to the opening of the horizon for things, to their “illumination,” thanks to which the things themselves can reveal or manifest themselves, though not necessarily in the fullness of their presence or transparency.²⁵ Thanks to questions and their properties, we can gain an insight into essential aspects of things, into the richness of their various states and nuances. By contrast, the answer is a closing of the horizon for things and a confirmation of the domination of the human over being, since the giving of an answer means that it is not the things which illuminate themselves, but the human being who “illuminates,” thus gaining knowledge but also closing the path to further, more subtle contact with things²⁶. This conception merits a closer and more detailed description.

The six functions of the question are, respectively: suspension, reversal, negation, indetermination, organization and multiplication. The being “suspended” in the question (the expression of which is the rising intonation of the interrogative sentence) is being that neither “is” (not in the everyday, but rather in the “strong,” philosophical sense), nor ceases to exist, and therefore is moved or “rocked” to its very foundations – with its possibility, certainty, identity, and even its very right to exist put into doubt. “Reversal” – visible in the inverted syntax of the interrogative sentence – functions like a reflection in a mirror, which gives a double image of things and thus puts them in doubt (the Romanian word *îndoire*, written by Noica as *în-doire*, means both “to double” and “to question”). When this “doubling-questioning” takes on its most radical form it can lead to “negation,” which through the interrogative sentence in the negative form expresses the complete rejection and denial of being, defined by Noica with the term “demonism.” When the negation does not take a radical or absolute form, but rather a neutral character, we can speak of “indetermination,” or the ontological indefiniteness of things, which in the Romanian language finds expression especially in indefinite pronouns and various particles attaching an indefinite character to expressions of time, place, etc. In Noica’s view, this

25 In *Devenirea întru ființa* (p. 198) Noica follows Heidegger in maintaining that language, as a more ontologically expressive reality than man, is in itself a question about being.

26 Noica, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, p. 13.

indetermination – which at times appears to be similar to the idea of insolubility or aporia – takes on the most “liberative” character among all the functions of the question he enumerates, since it opens up excessively defined being to new horizons, to that which may come, to new forms and ways of realization. In the organizational function – or, as Noica also puts it, the “thetical,” and not merely hypothetical function, expressing doubt, astonishment, ignorance – the indirect question appears and takes the form of the affirmative sentence (“the question of whether. . .”; “I’d like to know whether. . .”). This function of the question contains the previous functions, but at the same time it has a positive character in that it founds or establishes an area or domain of being while also constituting a first step in the direction of a potential – but no more than potential – answer or affirmative statement. The last of the question functions distinguished is the multiplication of the area of being. A genuine question is always “wiser” than the answer. It contains more content and it cannot be exhausted by the answer, since in its essence there is an unerasable remnant, a “surplus,” which the answer cannot absorb or abolish in its content. In this way, the question opens up an area of possibility or potentiality around every answer, which is preserved, as it were, in spite of – or even in opposition to – its positivity, affirmativity and tendency towards a final resolution.²⁷

Noica was clearly keen to keep his conception of questions and modalities within the area of ontology and to treat them as particular qualities of being itself. For the same reason, despite recognizing certain similarities between his conceptions and, for instance, modal logic, he enriches and strengthens his list of the six functions of the question with an equal number of ontological situations, in order not to leave any doubt that his goal is not the description of the relation of man to being, or the properties of human cognition, but rather a description of the characteristics of being itself. These six ontological situations form their own constellation, or, as Noica himself writes, an “aura” around present being – that which is “is” – and, although superficially deprived of its ontic power, they actually enrich it with additional dimensions. The very concept of the situatedness of being means the acceptance of a historical, adventitious or concrete perspective – *sub specie temporis*, not *aeternitatis* – and assumes that the understanding of being is possible only in concrete conditions and circumstances.²⁸

Being begins with that which has tried to be. The first and starting ontological situation is therefore a situation of the absence of being, which

27 Noica, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, pp. 21-22.

28 In *Devenirea întru ființa* (p. 284) Noica calls this regional ontology “the diversity of ontological situations in which the real reveals itself.”

nevertheless is not synonymous with pure nothingness or non-being, but rather with a failed striving to be or with the impossibility of coming into existence. In Noica's interpretation, that which is absent is that which, in spite of trying, has not succeeded in taking on being or in entering into the area of the existent. However, this striving, though unrealized, constitutes a certain form of being, or of the real, and therefore demands an ontology capable of describing it. Moreover, it comprises an area of existence that is particularly fertile and interesting from many points of view. Here Noica's conception, it would seem, is much closer to Greek thought – according to which non-being [*me on*] is that which is chaotic, disordered and shapeless – than it is to biblical thought, which represents non-being as an absolute void or nothingness, though the Romanian philosopher accents not chaos, but unfulfilled, unobjectified, unrealized being. Furthermore, he does not treat this unrealized being as the worst ontological level, but, on the contrary, as that sphere without which there is no way of understanding the spiritual life of human beings and their creations: history and culture. Here Noica seems to sketch out a project not only for an alternative ontology of that which does not exist or has not fully come into existence, but also a more specific project for an alternative history written from the perspective of that which has broken down on the threshold of the possibility of existence, that which has not received its own voice, or which has remained, like an unrealized work of art, at the stage of the sketch, plan, intention – in short, of everything that has been expressed by the modality of “that which was not to be” [*n-a fost sã fie*]. Therefore, this project seems to bear an unexpected affinity with Walter Benjamin's conception of history, insofar as it accents what is rejected, destroyed, “defeated” and ruined in being and history. However, for Noica, this defeat lay in the very nature of things and was programmed in advance.

The second ontological situation – and the corresponding second modality – is expressed in the formulation “that which was to be” [*era sã fie*]. The first ontological situation describes that which was condemned in advance to failure and unfulfillment as a result of a lack of certain general, normative conditions indispensable to the coming into existence of particular being. The second situation expresses suspended and blocked being – that which has remained a kind of pure possibility and has not taken on a concrete or individualized form. Noica refers here to the schema of dialectical oppositions, particularly to the Hegelian pair of master and slave, showing that what is defeated (ontologically, historically) is capable of surviving in vestigial, fragmentary, imperfect form within the victorious member of the opposition.

Potential being, “that which would be” [*va fi fiind*], is the third ontological situation. This situation no longer bears within itself any signs of defectiveness,

in the form of failure or being blocked, but rather the promise of being, or of the coming into existence of something. Setting aside Noica's specialist grammatical considerations and his comparisons of conditional modes and optative and conjunctive forms in Romanian and other languages, we might say that the essence of this ontological situation is the expression of doubt or uncertainty towards being as such, and not towards human intention or even towards any factual states. On this ontological level we might certainly include intentional or imagined types of being, as well as – as Noica himself proposes – alternative versions of reality, created by human beings and essential to their moral and emotional experience. However, the most crucial and radical consequence of this ontological situation is Noica's criticism – citing the example of isotopes – of the principle of identity, especially in the version of identity developed by formal logic. Noica replaces it with a being multiplied and expanded by various versions constructed from its own diversity.

The three first situations create a peculiar past, or prehistory of real being – “pre-being” [*preființa*], as Noica calls it – revealing, respectively, that which is most strongly marked by negativity (“that which was not to be”); that which is emerging from negativity but keeps falling back into it (“that which was to be”); and doubtful possibility (“that which would be”). The modality of the type “could have been” [*ar fi să fie*] describes a possibility more certain than a potentiality and at the same time the beginning of the grounding of being and its establishment on a foundation. In contrast to pure possibilities or potentials in the scholastic or logical sense – which are devoid of any power, “lazy,” passive and create an ontological reserve in relation to what is actual and what has factually come into existence – the ontological situation described by Noica concerns being that aspires towards existence, is oriented towards existing; that is, the kind of being that has not yet come into existence due to its own weakness, and not that which could not come into existence due to external conditions unfavorable to it. This possibility expressed by the Romanian language is distinguished by an existential independence and autonomy that is lacking in the traditional category of potentiality as that which is only internally uncontradictory, which constitutes a kind of authorization for what is, and which is the next step or circle on the ladder of beings, by now closer to the real than previous steps or circles.

In the modality expressed in the formulation “that which is to be” [*este să fie*] we find a manifestation of necessity, though a “weak” necessity whose imperative nature is combined with a suppositionality and conditionality. This is a situation of entering into and accepting being, a situation in which the “periphery” of being diffuses everywhere and scatters, while its center is nowhere or subject to disappearance. Noica characterizes this kind of being as

“soft,” more accessible and rational than that described by traditional metaphysical concepts. Here “rational” means that which is deprived of an absolute character, or that which is not given of its own accord in an act of direct cognition or intuition that captures the first principle in a manner not subject to discussion as a basis or grounding for other beings. According to Noica, the model for this kind of experience of being – as something absolute, sublime, inexpressible and thus opposed to being that is graspable, cut to human measure, or “weak” – is divinity as first principle or secularized versions of divinity such as Spinoza’s substance, or Hegel’s Absolute Spirit.

Finally, the last ontological situation refers to “that which was to be” [*a fost să fie*]. Noica interprets this formulation in an interesting way, citing the common construction “that which was written” (meaning destined for somebody or something), which is not meant to express fatalism (particularly in the Romanian, “mioritic” version) or the belief that the course of things is written and determined in advance, but rather treats being as a text to be read. Here the Romanian philosopher alludes to the metaphor of the code of being both as an unambiguous text that may be realized, or perhaps not realized, and as expressing an authorization of being and its right to exist. And yet the phrase “whoever says ‘written being,’ says also ‘read being’”²⁹ may be supplemented with the idea of “interpreted being,” or being given in the acts of interpreting and “prescribing” being. This is meant not only in the sense of “prescription” as the only, previously established version of the code or formula, but also in the sense of multiplicity, diversity and the interpretive nature of being itself. This kind of reading brings Noica closer to Vattimo’s hermeneutical ontology – to be discussed later – according to which interpretation is the form in which weak being, deprived of a “strong” essence, is given.

Thus described in its modalities and situations, being is excess [*exuberanța*], something additional or excessive in meaning: going beyond the measure of necessity and giving expression to a freedom from the weight, totality and “massiveness” of being as that which exclusively “is” (in the sense of “is present”), and that which tends towards embracing the entire area of what exists and possessing an exclusive right to define its validity.

In the second direction in which Noica’s characterization of ontological weakness moves, weakening is no longer treated as liberation from a strong version of being so much as a consequence of the withdrawal or concealment of being. Here the defective nature of being is accented – that is, everything that finds itself somehow “beneath” the formed and fulfilled being that has taken on a defined shape or form. This is, as Noica puts it, the “darker” side of being,

29 Ibid., p. 50.

characterized in terms very close to the Heideggerian idea – from the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art” – of the forgetting of being, its hiddenness, or its “earthliness.” Noica’s terms are also not too far removed from the idea of nihilism as developed by Heidegger, and subsequently by Vattimo, although Noica himself did not use this concept. This forgetting has two basic dimensions in Noica’s work. The first of these is the human being’s forgetting about being, which has taken place within the main currents of modern Western thought at the price of the domination of the being of that which is present and certain over being itself. The second dimension is forgetting as an event of being itself based on its withdrawal and therefore as a “weakening”, which signifies that being no longer “is”: “A logician could get along perfectly well without it [being] in his organized game of signs that no longer want to mean anything on the plane of reality nor even on the plane of thought. In opposition to the point-like nature of being in logic, there is its diffused totality from other contemporary conceptions. Here the sense of being would be – as if in a new pantheism or Spinozism – a sense of some total presence, without any conditioning factors. But such an unconditioned presence becomes undifferentiable and can equally well be total absence, as has been previously noted. We do not merely ‘forget’ about being, both on the speculative plane and in spiritual experience – which sounds like a reprimand – but rather being itself wholly withdraws from the act of cognition in such a way that we can more easily say what being is not than what it is. Therefore the Western logician and metaphysician wishes for *security*: the former in the order of exactness, the latter in the order of absolute certainty.”³⁰

This weak area of being, also forgotten in the historical sense, neglected, treated as secondary, superficial and less perfect, vegetating on the margins of the great, classic ontological concepts, deserves its own separate ontology: “on that being which grows up from below [*de jos*], trying to cobble itself together from the uncertainty and smallness of things, seeking a model for itself and sometimes fulfilling itself under the sign of the principles of organization that Eminescu called ‘*arhei*’ – science has usually remained silent on being. European thinkers from the past who devoted themselves to the study of being were not interested in the low world as Romanian thought has been. They generally referred to the being above, sure of itself, unstained by coming into being and passing away, a being entirely penetrated by brightness, which could, however, only plunge everything beneath it into darkness or even non-being.”³¹ Noica opposes this conception of “top-down” being to a being that might be

30 Ibid., p. 58.

31 Noica, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, p.152. On the concept of “*arhei*” in Noica’s work, cf. Guliciuc, *Constantin Noica sau revolta întru spirit*, pp. 112-116.

defined as secularized, since it is incarnated in time and space, deprived of its inaccessibility and absoluteness.

Therefore, the subject of weak ontology is everything that might be defined as a remnant of being, and which Noica himself defined as “fragile nature” [*frageda fire*], as that which has been discarded from the area of being, that which has not taken on being and which appears as chaos and disorder. The Romanian philosopher considered this ontic sphere to be more “revelatory” and intensive than the sphere of order and full being.³² This is not the “classic” area of being, but one of which an intuition is given by ruins rather than by grand constructions.³³ This fragility, or rather brokenness (the Romanian word *fraged* comes from Latin *frango*, meaning to break) has two basic, mutually contradictory meanings. The first refers to the “brittleness” or breaking (*frângerea*) of that which is hard, frozen, unorganic – in other words, it refers to the liberation of that which is alive and in the process of becoming. The second points to the value and inalienable dignity of that which is fragile, weak, soft (*frăgezimea*) – that is, of the body, of what is organic and thus unenduring, subject to spoiling or destruction.³⁴

The two meanings of fragility or “brokenness” cited here indicate that the two above-mentioned directions in Noica’s thought about weakened being are convergent on several fundamental points. Noica’s weak ontology is – to speak in today’s language – a critique of the metaphysics of presence, since it is based on the assumption that “Being not only ‘is,’” but “the presence of being or present being does not constitute the only ground for the process of being.” In other words, it does not exhaust the entire field of existence demanding to be taken into consideration. Noica always poses ontological questions – that is, questions about what weak being is and how it exists. However, he does not suggest how we might come to know or describe it.

Noica also critiqued the very idea of the ground, the basis, the “ultimate instances” of being. His critique was not based on the total rejection of any ontological grounding or on some version of the Heideggerian leap into the *Abgrund*, but on the admittance of a multiplicity of founding principles, and on the acceptance of their “weakened” versions, just as Noica did in the case of such categories as nature or the logos, which had lost their status as the foundation or basis of being and thought: “But, since the highest instances no longer satisfy us, *what* does being now explain? Still these two– nature and reason – but in a milder and more lively understanding, such as the Romanian

32 Noica, *Sentimentul românesc al fîinței*, pp. 69-70.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

philosophical sensibility seems to understand them.”³⁵ However, the separation with serious, absolute, solemn, static or massive being (as Noica most often defined “strong” being) does not mean an acceptance of its opposite – that is, of nothingness or the absurd. Noica’s weak ontology has an anti-dualistic character and assumes a certain continuum of the process of being with various degrees of intensity, although this continuum would be heterogeneous, deprived of stable grounding and comparable not to durable structure, but to a shifting, constantly moving field or – as I have already suggested – text.³⁶ This ontology is an attempt to get out of the strong opposition between being and non-being by pointing towards murky, undefined areas of being, as towards that sphere which says more about being than simple presence or absence, and thus is essentially more interesting and significant for the comprehension of the full spectrum of that which exists, even if it is a doubtful existence, deprived of certain foundations – an existence “somehow.”

Noica applied a similar six-part ontological scheme in a book published in the same year as *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, and entitled *Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit*, which more than any of Noica’s works constitutes an attempt to diagnose contemporary culture and its ailments. The titular maladies – in certain respects corresponding to the six situations and modalities of being from *Sentimentul românesc* – are, respectively: *catholitis*, *todetitis*, *horetitis*, *acatholia*, *atodecia* and *ahorecia*. The first three are the result of an immanent lack of one of the conditions for being, which Noica calls “the ontological triplet”³⁷: the general, the individual, and the determinations. The latter refers to ways in which the human being shapes himself and his reality through, among other things, language and other means of communication, art, technology, scientific knowledge, historical or social action. The next three maladies are caused by the refusal or inability to accept these determinations.

Catholitis (from the Greek *katholon*, meaning “what is general”) is a malady caused by a lack of the general element – rules, norms, orders, structures – in the lives of individuals or collectives, which in cases where there is an awareness of this lack may sometimes express itself in a refusal to consent to the ordinariness of individual existence and to the lack of a transcendental meaning of the world, thus resulting in despairing attempts to give existence some higher sense through, for example, engagement in an ideology. Its exemplary figure is the evangelical prodigal son, who after rejecting the imposed general meanings (in

35 Ibid., p. 140.

36 Ibid., pp. 78-79.

37 Noica, Constantin, *Sześć chorób ducha współczesnego*, trans. I. Kania (Kraków: Oficyna Literacki, 1997), p. 34.

this case: family life), seeks his own meaning; in philosophy it is most fully expressed by existentialism. In the case of unconscious *catholitis*, the manifestations of individual existence now attain rootedness in the everyday, in the sphere of the senses. It seems that this version of the malady may be defined as a disease of adventitiousness – meaning both adventure (an activity undirected at any general goal supplied in advance) and “accident”, in the philosophical sense of what is torn away from essence and essentiality. The ideas of the innocence of becoming and blind chance, activism, as well as the cults of multiplicity, diversity and changeability, are also associated with the unconscious *catholitis* of lack of generality. It expresses itself in an aspiration towards the immoderate broadening of experience and, on the plane of language, by the primacy of the verb.

In *todetitis*, we find a lack of individuality or concrete existence, which has been appropriated by general meanings. The existence of the person or being suffering from *todetitis* is life on the level of “generalities,” pure essences, species without individual incarnations. In today’s culture, in spite of the degradation of all absolute beings, this malady manifests itself in the ideal of pure rationality, order, the purification of the language of science and logic, of exact knowledge – in other words, in the scientific-technical organization of the world. The individual is not, as in *catholitis*, torn away from the general, but is rather reduced to the role of its ordinary exemplification, a statistical datum. Theoretical natures, social utopias, globalization and the homogenization of contemporary culture are all manifestations of *todetitis*.

Both *horetitis* and its opposite, *ahoretia*, are based on a lack of “determinations” – manifestations of reality allowing for the harmonious reconciliation of the dimension of individual being with the sphere of general meanings.³⁸ In the case of the former, a universal idea, directly embodied in a particular being with an individual or collective character, causes – as a result of its gravity – a paralysis of determinations. An example of this malady is Don Quixote, who embodies a certain ideal, but cannot find an appropriate way to realize it because, in his case, the determinations – that is, the obstacles and opponents he meets on his way, and who are the indispensable “means” for the realization of his idea – are either fictional or imposed by others. Another example of *horetitis*, this time on the artistic plane, is supplied by the Pygmalion myth. The animated Galatea is the embodiment of an aesthetic ideal, a general idea of beauty, though she thus makes it impossible – as a perfect and completed work after which nothing else can arise – for any further works to come into

38 In *Scrisori despre logica lui Hermes* (p. 450) Noica uses the idea of narration to depict the way in which the individual takes on determinations.

being, or for the determinations to be further developed. In *acatholia*, on the other hand, the blockage or withering of determinations is caused by the fact that the individual directly, above and beyond concrete realizations, establishes his bond with the general. This situation may be exemplified, for instance, by mystics, ascetics, the Stoics, and Arjuna, the hero of the Bhagavad Gita, none of whom need any intermediaries – such as language, history, or action – to inscribe their lives into a general meaning. A contemporary realization of *acatholia*, according to Noica, is Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in which the protagonists indeed perceive the general (the Godot for whom they are waiting), though they reject all forms of action and communication. Interestingly, Noica regarded himself as an ahoretic, offering up his own biography as an example of this particular malady.

Atodetia is based on the conscious rejection of individuality and singularity in favor of general meanings. This is the malady of a culture, especially of a mature and refined culture, which devotes itself to the cultivation of its values and symbols. Among philosophers, Kant suffered from this malady, since he did not possess an individual biography, but only a biography of “ideas.” Noica finds an extreme form of *atodetia* in Tolstoy's novels, where the individuality of the characters is almost entirely subordinated to the general laws of history, becoming a mere product of them.

An extreme example of *acatholia*, or the refusal to accept the general, is Don Juan. He is an individual, an individuality, somebody distinctly different from the general rule. Moreover, he does not lack determinations – i.e. the women seduced by him. And yet he is unable to give his life any general meaning, to inscribe it into a broader plan, to submit it to an idea. Hence his existence is only the eternal repetition of the same pattern or, we might add, pure becoming, devoid of any reference to a broader horizon of being. Interestingly, it is precisely *acatholia* in its moderate forms that complements, together with *todetitis*, the image of contemporary Western civilization, with its preference for facts, details, particular cases, the registration of particular data torn away from general meanings, the cultivation of exactitude and precision, which has replaced the search for truth.

In *Six Maladies*, Noica expresses the extremely important conviction, which he developed later in *Devenirea întru ființa*, that the faults or imperfections of the human being (as well as the diseases of being itself, which are identical with these imperfections) are in fact an anthropological and ontological opportunity or road of development: “In the continuation of the argument one thing will become clear: namely that with the human being, and only with the human being, maladies of being are ontological *stimuli*. For what kind of being would the human be if he could not grow in his humanity? In fact the only true malady

for the human being is the empty and depressing consciousness of his ephemerality, destructibility and the pointlessness of all temptations of being and acting. Only this weakens the human being (insofar as this malady itself does not become poetry or song). On the other hand, maladies of being – that is, of its spiritual existence – are, or can be, as anomalies, positive from the human point of view. The disorder of the human being is the source of his creative powers.”³⁹ Here Noica seems to confirm the diagnosis of a large proportion of contemporary philosophy that man is a defective being, afflicted by a crisis, *manque à être*. However, what distinguishes the author of *Six Maladies* are the unexpectedly optimistic conclusions he draws from this fact.

A somewhat different conception of ontological weakness than those mentioned above can be found in Noica’s greatest work – the monumental treatise *Devenirea întru ființa*, which in terms of its intellectual ambition and the fundamental character of the ontological questions raised may be compared with Heidegger’s *Being and Time* and Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*. The majority of themes already discussed concerning the weakness of being are preserved, reinterpreted and integrated with a broader set of problems in this work, though new aspects of “weakening” also appear. Noica also places less emphasis here on the Romanian roots of his conceptions than in *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, for instance, and instead uses them to construct a universal ontological vision. In *Devenirea întru ființa* Noica does not treat the weakness of being autonomously, as a self-sufficient theme and object of description, but rather includes it within a significantly broader ontological model, which we might regard as the third and final stage in the formation of the concept of weak ontology in Noica’s thought.

Devenirea întru ființa is divided into two volumes: the historical “Încercare asupra filozofiei tradiționale” [“Essay on Traditional Philosophy”], written in the 1950s, and the theoretical “Tratat de ontologie” [“Treatise on Ontology”], written in the 1980s. It would be impossible here to mention all of the book’s themes, so I shall limit myself to the most important issues from the perspective I have adopted. Two aspects of the first, historical part of the treatise are crucial: Noica’s attempt to ontologize the Kantian categories, which might be compared with Heidegger’s reading of Kantian philosophy in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, and his critical reinterpretation of dialectical thought. In Noica’s view, traditional Hegelian and post-Hegelian dialectics have been characterized by linearity – or an emphasis on pure becoming and sequence in time – and by a neutral, formal shape based on the treatment of both members of the dialectical opposition as equivalent, and the treatment of their synthesis from a neutral

39 Noica, *Sześć chorób ducha współczesnego*, p. 43.

position. By contrast, the dialectic proposed by the author of *Devenirea întru ființa* is modeled on the wheel or circle [*cerc*], and is oriented or directed (in the double meaning of the word “sense,” which also signifies “direction,” or striving towards something) towards being, the good, truth, etc. Therefore, thinking is not the simple imitation or “doubling” of reality, but an active striving towards being, though this striving has no end, since being – as the widest and most distant circle or horizon – finds itself in constant motion, always diffusing itself and, in this way, losing itself and weakening.⁴⁰ The preposition “*întru*” mentioned above – a word that Hegel lacked⁴¹ – meaning both “in” and “towards” – founds Noica’s whole conception, since it allows for a way out of the opposition of the static being (today we would probably say “essentialism”) characterizing Greek philosophy and the “blind,” directionless becoming typical of contemporary or – more broadly – modern thought. The hermeneutical nature of “*întru*” is based on the fact that, in order to “become” towards being, it is necessary already to be settled in being. Conversely, “being in” assumes a dynamic process, a movement of becoming, though oriented not towards simply striving ahead but rather towards a potentially infinite horizon of being. Thinking on the margins of Hegel, which Noica admits to,⁴² means not only submitting to the inspiration of his philosophy and thinking together with him, but also a critical interpretation of his philosophy, a thinking against him conducted to a large degree in the spirit of hermeneutics and drawing on what is peripheral within Hegelianism. Therefore, the conceptions of Noica and Vattimo emerge from the same sources – dialectics and the philosophy of Heidegger – though these are understood and applied in different ways.

In order to grasp the characteristics of the weakness of being and the manifold functions fulfilled by the ontological model proposed by Noica, the first part of *Devenirea întru ființa* – entitled “*Ființa în cele ce sînt*” [“Being in Things that Are”] – is of primary significance.⁴³ Noica’s point of departure here is the belief, already expressed in earlier works, that “being does not mean only fullness, ultimate balance, permanence or homogeneity” (D211) and is not exclusively that which is “singular, sacred, eternal” (D192). Moreover, this concept of being is responsible for “havoc not only in the world, but also in being” (D269); it is also responsible for the actual disappearance of ontology from the horizon of contemporary culture (D382), which has lost interest in being that is inaccessible, or too distant from, common experience. In *Devenirea*

40 Noica, *Devenirea întru ființa*, p. 128. From now on cited in the text as “D” in parentheses followed by the page number.

41 Noica, *Cuvânt împreună despre rostirea filozofică românească*, p. 31.

42 Noica, *Devenirea întru ființa*, p. 143.

43 These are paragraphs 1-30, pp. 195-326.

întru ființa, Noica also maintains the main line of critique aimed at traditional ontology, of which the only object of interest has been precisely full, perfect and present being, or – to quote the philosopher’s metaphorical formulations – “massive and homogeneous being.” The “death” of this perfect being does not mean, according to Noica, the twilight of ontology, but quite the contrary: a condition for the possibility of ontology is precisely a renunciation of the “strong” conception of being, while its task ought to be to show just how defective and “poorly made” things are (D196). Here, Noica interestingly reformulates, or even reverses, the famous Heideggerian thesis about the forgetting of being that characterizes metaphysics, especially modern metaphysics. According to Noica, this forgetting concerns not being as such, or “great” being, but rather imperfect and modest being, being from the world, which consists of that which is not. In other words, it consists of the ontological situations distinguished earlier in *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*: that which is not yet, that which has been, would be, could have been, etc. (D304, 207, 208). However, the source of this forgetting is similar for Heidegger and Noica, except that the latter sees it not in the whole of scientific-technological civilization, but more narrowly in neo-Positivist philosophy and in the attitude to being typical of logic and mathematics. This attitude is characterized by the “elevation of exactitude” and by treating only that which is permanent and indestructible – in other words, that which is present and understood as unchanging essence – as worthy of the name “being.” This forgetting also takes place in language, in its progressive “positivization,” its striving towards unambiguity and precision, its establishing of meanings and transformation of them into simple means of communication, signifying the sacrificing of “truth” in favor of “exactitude” (D303-304).

The point of departure for Noica’s philosophizing – and a particular “principlum” of his entire ontological model – is weakened being, the expression of which is, for instance, the following statement: “It is true in the version of ontology I am proposing here that the structure of being is constructed not from the top, beginning with Spirit or Absolute Being, but rather emerges from the humble reality of the destructible world” (D323). Ontological weakness makes itself most noticeable in six defects, or precarities [*precarități*], of being. The characteristics of these precarities follow, to a significant extent, the six maladies of the modern soul and are a result of a deviation in, or lack of coordination between, the elements of the ontological triad: the individual, the general and the determinations. Noica calls successful coordination “ontological anastrophe”, and unsuccessful coordination “ontological catastrophe.” The first of the defects concerns the individual, who finds attributes and determinants for himself, but without reference to the general. It can be found in uncontrolled “self-projection,”

in surrender to pure and blind experience. By contrast, the second defect is based on a situation in which it is the individual that succumbs to obscurity, while the determinations remain on the level of the general, as “ideality” deprived of rootedness in reality, like a world of values or meanings gathered in a museum or not crossing the threshold of the laboratory. In the third type of defectiveness, the general (for instance, the idea, the Platonic Republic), by becoming embodied in an individual, changes the individual into an object by not allowing for his free self-realization in the search for determinations. The remaining defects represent the reversal of the first three. In the fourth ontological variety of defectiveness, the “crisis” is based on a lack of suitable determinations in the act of the individuals’ integration with the general. In the fifth, it is based on the general taking on determinations, without being capable of incarnating into a concrete, individual form. Finally, in the sixth, it is based on the determinations being concentrated in individual being, while being deprived of any rootedness in the general.

In *Devenirea întru ființa*, the maladies of the soul take on a broader and deeper meaning, becoming “accidents” – in all the richness of this word, both in its technical and common meanings – of being as such, but also becoming basic paths towards [*întru*] being. Weakness and precariousness are treated in Noica’s treatise not only as a liberation from the crushing burden of being and traditional ontology – or as a result of the concealment or withdrawal of being – but above all as a great opportunity for being. It is precisely this conception that is the most crucial novelty to appear in *Devenirea întru ființa* and it most clearly differentiates the final stage in the development of Noica’s weak ontology from the two earlier stages. This, in short, is how the philosopher presents his argument: being is not identical with any thing, and no thing fully expresses being, but rather it is “neither this nor that,” it defines what is not, the absence inherent in what is real. Therefore being in things “is” what they are not – in other words, lack, void, absence, ontological deficiency. Looking at this question from a different perspective, we might say that things are “the nothing of being” (D198), which – however – is not therefore something perfect, full and complete, existing beyond things in some “elsewhere,” in an ideal reality. On the contrary, it exists in things and only in them, although always as something unfulfilled, peripheral, “ruined,” deprived of center, fullness, permanence, or of ontological “fixation” (D199-200).

However, this void, or the process of “emptying” things of being, like the consciousness of universal ontological unfulfillment, does not lead Noica to construct any kind of philosophy of absence, or of nihilism. Deficiency means above all opening, stimulation, a step towards being, a gesture of aspiration towards it (D198, 213, 274, 295). In this way, the thing is somehow liberated from itself, from the limitations imposed upon it by its infinitely repeated

identity, and gains an ability to go beyond this identity towards something else. Noica describes this condition using two formulations: the closure that opens [*închidere ce se deschide*] and the limitation that does not limit [*limitația ce nu limitează*]. Examples of the latter are provided by open or relative truths, as opposed to absolute truths, which cannot be further developed or reformulated (D246). The closure that opens has an ontologically originary and primary character (as Noica says, it is *semen etnis*): being is above all opening, while that which does not open loses its chance to be (D211, 213). Nevertheless, Noica simultaneously emphasizes that ontological opening can be gained only by that which is closed, that things would not be able to open if they were not previously characterized precisely by closure (D215, 222). This circular situation of the mutual determination of closure and opening (after all, an opening that closes may also exist – for instance, the machine as a kind of synecdoche for the whole world of technology, which is judged negatively by Noica) most fully renders the adverb *întru* in the semantic ambiguity repeatedly emphasized by Noica: of being “in” – that is, limitation, closure, unambiguous determination, as in a certain situation – as well as of being “towards” – that is, tension, pulsation, anxiety and a disturbance to an equilibrium which, without liquidating or abolishing the previous aspects, bears within itself the elements of ontological opening.

A particularly interesting dimension of the ontological weakness characterized in *Devenirea întru ființa* is what might be described as the narrativity of being: “Our ontology not only introduces a different image of being than the frozen and sacred one, but it also introduces a being that reaches the very margins [*văgăunile*] of reality. Everything that narrates *is* – such is the vision of being characteristic of the Romanian sensibility, for ‘to be’ also means something different than ‘is’ in the classical sense.; it also means: would be, could be, was to be, should be, but was not (though it tried)” (D313). Between being and narration two relations overlap. On the one hand, narrative would be impossible if there were not some order of being and in being. On the other hand, everything that can find itself in a well-constructed narrative, possessing meaning and *logos*, has a reason to be and a certain ontological substantiality. In other words, the existence of the world – in all its situations and precarities – is proof that a narrative about the world is possible, while the possibility of narrating about the world proves its existence. In proving that we cannot have an idea of a finite or perfected reality, Noica proposes his own narrativization of the classic ontological argument, in which the place of the idea is taken by narrative, constituting proof that being is, but also and simultaneously that it more than “is” (since it does not exhaust itself in simple presence, in a strong form that can only be duplicated and copied), that it possesses a whole range of weak, or loose

forms. Thus the narrative is not a faithful imitation of reality; rather, it expands reality by new meanings. It is an increase in being. One might also formulate a stronger version of this thesis: being itself, in its weak and hazy regions, turns or dissolves into narration, into fiction.

The specific character of Noica's philosophy – and perhaps also its greatest meaning and intellectual potential, not just in the historical sense, but also in a sense most relevant for contemporary culture – is based on the fact that it suggests a path out of the opposition between fundamentalism and nihilism, of “strong” being treated as the basis of things and pure becoming. Noica's conception – or rather the sample I have endeavored to describe – may be interpreted both in a manner that is closer to dialectics and, in a way, bears more affinity with the philosophy of difference. Both of these readings are somehow valid, and one might argue cogently in favor of either. In the first interpretation, weakness would be closer to categories of negation and would ultimately lead to a “stronger” and fuller version of being. However, Noica's thought is protected against this finalism in several ways, first of all by the “circular” understanding of dialectics, which broadens it with the discoveries of hermeneutics. Secondly, it is protected by the autonomous treatment of the weakness and “faultiness” of being, which is not merely a stage on the road to some final fulfillment. Finally, it is protected by the extraction of the thought potential of “*întru*,” which reveals a rich ontological situation including both the static and dynamic nature of being, its closure and opening, its “bright” and “dark” sides as integral components.⁴⁴ Precisely in the second of the interpretations distinguished here Noica's accent would fall on the incessant and fertile – since it is impossible to abolish or reconcile – opposition between becoming towards becoming and becoming towards being, between opening and closure, between “*în*” and “*întru*” as the basic ontological mechanism (D213), which seems to bear an affinity with the Heideggerian game between the hidden and unhidden nature of being.

Destructibility and mortality belong to the very essence of being, and it is in weakness, fragility, deficiency, defectiveness that we find the basis of the great dignity of existence and its immanent value precisely as *ens imperfectum*, or even *imperfectissimum* (both in the descriptive and evaluative sense), as well as the basis of the greatest ontological “chance” for being in its entirety, as well as for the human being. It is precisely that which is momentary, accidental and

44 Noica himself clearly differentiates weakness of being from dialectical negation: “Therefore I start from a lack of being that is something entirely different from the powerful *das Nichts* of Hegel, pure nothingness, into which passes a being devoid of determinations. This humble lack of being of every thing can be taken as a natural point of departure.” See: Liiceanu, Gabriel, *Dziennik z Păltinișu, Pajdeja jako model w kulturze humanistycznej*, trans. I. Kania (Sejny: Pogranicze, 2001), p. 127.

poor – when it is treated autonomously and not as appearance, shadow or imitation of some *ens perfectum* – which expresses being better than that which is enduring and perfect. The model of weak being proposed by Noica seems, at the same time, to be richer than Vattimo’s *pensiero debole* – in which being only “burns out” without leaving any horizon or opening – because it also sketches a way out of the forgetting of being, and thus from metaphysical thinking and from modernity.

A very similar characterization of the experience of being suggested by the Romanian language can be found in a book I have already mentioned, written by the essayist and scholar of medieval Christian philosophy, Mircea Vulcănescu (1904-1952) – *Dimensiunea românească a existenței*. The “weak” meaning possessed by concepts such as reality or existence results from the fact that the Romanian language does not accord presence (*prezența*) as a philosophical concept a privileged status in being. To be present does not mean to be given in enduring, universal categories; rather – as in the German term *Dasein* – it means to be here and now, in a particular place and time, “to be in the world,” “to occur.”⁴⁵ The consequence of this state of things is, first of all, the primacy of the temporal over the spatial dimension, where “to occur” (*întâmplare*) means to be situated in time and to undergo change, to pass away. Secondly, it implies the primacy of what is specific over what is general and universal. According to Vulcănescu, an ontology sketched in the Romanian language always has a regional and relative character, while essence is only a certain specific kind or instance of the broader phenomenon of existence. Thirdly, it implies the primacy of the possible over the actual, because that which has been realized is only a part of the richer, more extensive area that is being as the entirety of what has been, will be and may be.⁴⁶

Therefore, the world is not a collection of objects or “present” things. Instead, it is perceived in religious categories, as an area in which the sacred manifests itself. However, it does not have a transcendent character, nor does it assume a strong opposition between the material, impermanent, accidental world and the ideal, essential and perfect world. The sacred is an immanent dimension of reality, serving it as a domain of order: “Therefore the sacred [*svințenia*] manifests itself as the immanent. It penetrates everything. The sun is sacred. The sheep is sacred. Everything that has its own time and place, in accordance with order and meaning, is sacred.”⁴⁷

45 Vulcănescu, pp. 112, 121.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 125, 129, 132, 133.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Noica's philosophy appears to be far removed from contemporary discussions on the subject of modernity, postmodernity, and the place occupied within them by the ethical dimension. The author of *Creație si frumos* uses a traditional philosophical terminology, though – on the other hand – he attempts to seek out ways of speaking about being and the condition of man that are different from those offered by the philosophers of the grand tradition, especially by those espousing the modern philosophy of consciousness. His gesture of reaching back to the sources, to the premodern – or, more broadly, unmetaphysical – experience of being may be regarded as utopian. However, I consider it to be one of the most interesting of the twentieth-century “anti-metaphysical” proposals, an attempt to return to the place in European culture where we first sketched out the split between the world – ever more silent, alien to us and objectivized – and consciousness, which increasingly claims to be the only source of images of the world, as well as of meanings, values and norms.

Vattimo: Nihilism, Hermeneutics, Art⁴⁸

As in Noica's work, Vattimo's philosophy also suggests that it is not that which is strong, enduring and unchanging, but rather that which is fragile, weak and deficient that forms the point of departure for philosophical reflection and its distinctive object of description. Moreover, it becomes the horizon for the understanding of being and makes the experience of being possible: “That which is transcendental, which makes possible all experience of the world, is deficiency.”⁴⁹ The category of experience, as a form of knowledge, or of contact with deficiency, seems here to be intentionally selected. It suggests that “weak” areas of existence require a different language of description from the traditional one; they do not submit to rationalization and organization, and do not allow themselves to be crammed into the Heideggerian understanding of

48 The Polish reception of Vattimo's philosophy already has its own history. See: Popiel, Magdalena, “Włoskie drogi postmodernizmu Gianniego Vattimo,” *Teksty Drugie* 1 (1996); Potępa, Maciej, “Nihilizm i hermeneutyka w filozofii Gianniego Vattimo,” *Uniwersalny wymiar hermeneutyki*, ed. A. Przyłębski (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 1997); Leśniewski, Norbert, *O hermeneutyce radykalnej* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo UAM, 1998), pp. 69-77; Lorenc, Włodzimierz, *Hermeneutyczne koncepcje człowieka* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2003); Januskiewicz, Michał, *W-kolo hermeneutyki* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2007).

49 Vattimo, Gianni, “Dialektyka, różnica, myśl słaba,” trans. M. Surma-Gawłowska and A. Zawadzki, *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2003), p. 132. The original text was published in *Il pensiero debole*, eds. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1998). The first edition of the book appeared in 1983.

representation as a tool for domination of the subject over the world. Instead, they demand existential engagement from the person coming to know them, as well as an effort of opening oneself up, or “exposing oneself” to their truth.

Vattimo laid out his conception of weak thought [*pensiero debole*] most fully in a text written in 1992, “Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought,” where he juxtaposed it with strong thought, identified in the broadest terms with the great metaphysical tradition, though more specifically with post-Enlightenment philosophy. However, the idea itself and its diverse variants appear much earlier in Vattimo’s writings. Even in the introduction to his 1980 book, *Le avventure della differenza*, Vattimo – referring to the late Heidegger’s “philosophy of the end” and the idea of *Ge-Stell*, which Heidegger interprets as the world of technology and mass society – sketches out a project of weak ontology understood not only as a certain style of conducting purely philosophical reflections, but – much more broadly – as a sort of experience of being, reality and subjectivity typical especially of late modernity and its characteristic phenomena: “Heidegger’s thought answers to a certain expectation that modern thought imposes more and more strongly: an expectation of an ontology based on ‘weak’ categories.”⁵⁰ Weak ontology is juxtaposed with the entire metaphysical tradition, a tradition of thought marked by “violence,” since it is based on “strong” categories, or – to coin a phrase – “violencing” categories that privilege that which is general, unifying and supported on immovable and certain foundations.⁵¹

In a book published a year after *Le avventure della differenza* – entitled *Al di là del soggetto* – Vattimo develops the theme of the ontology of the end, or of the decline [*ontologia del declino*], and points to its two characteristic features. The first is the disappearance of the traditional, strong metaphysical opposition between substantial being and substance-less appearance. The second is a conception of being whose model is no longer, as previously, scientific objectivity and the world of permanent objects of scientific knowledge, but rather life, whose fundamental dimensions are the game of interpretation, finitude, mortality and historicity.⁵²

On what, generally speaking, does the difference between weak thought and strong thought depend? Strong thought – described by Vattimo in rather general terms – is characterized by the fact that it investigates being, or rather beings, in

50 Vattimo, Gianni, *Le avventure della differenza*, (Milano: Garzanti, 1980), pp. 9-10.

51 On the subject of the violence inscribed into metaphysics, see Derrida’s text, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978).

52 See: Vattimo, Gianni, *Al di là del soggetto. Nietzsche, Heidegger e l’ermeneutica* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1989).

the categories of presence, permanence and stability. It is thought that assumes the possibility of direct access to being – without cultural, historical or linguistic mediations – regardless of whether the emphasis is placed on the immediacy of pure sensory data, as in the empirical variant, or on the transcendental conditions for possible experience, as in the various rationalist variants. For strong thought, the point of departure is always the problem of the beginning, the basis, the foundation – whether it be in the traditional Aristotelian metaphysical version accenting the significance of first principles or archai, or in the historicizing Hegelian version based on the categories of fulfillment, culmination and finality.

Strong thought understands history as a linear, progressive, unidirectional movement. Its instrument is an idea of totality, identified with authenticity as the perfection or full development of the internal essence of a phenomenon (as Hegel said: “Truth is wholeness. Wholeness, on the other hand, is merely that essence which, thanks to its development, reaches its final conclusion”⁵³), as well as appropriation [*ri-appropriazione*] as the abolition of alienation and the regaining or restitution of everything which has been discarded, excluded or lost in the course of history. Thus it seems that we may consider the following as distinct forms of strong thought: dialectical philosophy, transcendental philosophy, especially phenomenology based on the idea of the epoche and the suspension of references to concrete historical and cultural horizons, as well as various types of philosophy that pattern themselves after the model of the exact and deductive sciences, which assume a referential concept of truth, though Vattimo pays relatively little attention to the latter.

For weak thought, on the other hand, being does not take the form of essence; it cannot be said to “be” as much as to “occur” or to “happen.” Precisely the categories of event, temporality and thrownness – drawn by Vattimo from his analyses of Heidegger – best characterize the conception of being that may be defined as weak. It seems that here it would be useful to look at the classical conception of “accidence” (the Greek *symbebekos*) as juxtaposed with “being” [*ousia*], since the idea of *symbebekos* comes from the compound verb *symbainein*, which means, among other things, precisely to happen, to occur, to fall out from the judgment of blind fate. Therefore it contains entire semantic fields referring, on the one hand, to the sphere of chance. On the other hand, it refers to temporality as development, as the basic progression of events in time (thanks to such semantic motifs as “to meet,” “to adhere,” “to come after,” “to result”). Therefore, by elaborating Vattimo’s reflections, as well as the intuitions contained in language, one might say that weak thought bears an

53 Hegel, G. W. F., *Fenomenologia ducha*, trans. A. Landman (Warszawa: PWN, 1983), p. 28.

affinity with the category of narration, in part because it treats being in the categories of chance, event, accident, occurrence in time, but also because it treats itself as a narrative about being, which finds its justification not in a comprehensive, universal theoretical project, but in the sphere of local, partial, narrative justifications.

Being is understood by weak thought not as presence but as occurrence, not so much as something that “is,” but as something that comes or arrives, something that is not given directly but only in signs, traces, contexts, cultural traditions, and diverse messages: “Here we can only say about being that it is a tradition (in the sense of what has been transmitted from the past), a message, *Über-lieferung*, *Geschick*. The world is experienced in horizons that are built from a series of echoes, linguistic resonances, rumors from the past, from others (from others living beside us, as well as from other cultures). *A priori*, what makes our experience of the world possible is *Geschick*, or destiny-message, and *Überlieferung*, or tradition (what has been transmitted). Being cannot be said to “be,” but rather to “transmit” (to set out on the road and send itself off) or to convey itself.”⁵⁴

54 Ibid., p. 7. The Heideggerian category of *Geschick* also plays a significant role in Derrida’s philosophy, especially in his books from the late 1980s, such as *La carte postale: De Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980) and *Psyché: Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), where this category, like the “gift” (especially in the sense of “*es gibt*,” another important idea from late Heideggerian thought) and the “trace,” is opposed to presence and representation traditionally understood. In *The Post Card (La Carte Postale)*, Derrida speaks of the “*envoi*,” or “sending,” which does not send “something,” meaning any particular thing or being, is not sent from a particular source, does not refer to any particular place, and is not directed or delivered to any particular addressee. Taking advantage of the ambiguity inherent in the concepts of “destiny” (“*destin*”), the “destination” of a letter or parcel, and the “addressee” (“*destinataire*”), Derrida writes: “When Being is thought *on the basis of* the gift of the *es gibt* (sorry for the simplifying stenography, this is only a letter), the gift itself is given *on the basis of* ‘something,’ which is nothing, which is not something; it would be, hmmm, like an ‘*envoi*,’ destination, the destination, sorry, of an *envoi* which, of course, does not send this or that, which sends nothing that is, nothing that is a ‘being’ a ‘present’” (*The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], p. 63).

Similarly, in “*Envoi*” from *Psyche*, Derrida clearly emphasizes the opposition between *envoi*, or historicity, and representation: “The *Geschick*, the *Schicken*, and the *Geschichte* of which Heidegger speaks are not sendings of the representative type. The historicity they constitute is not a representative or representable process, and in order to think it, we need a history of Being, of the *envoi* of Being that is no longer regulated or centered on representation” (*Psyche: Invention of the Other, Volume 1*, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007], p. 110).

Transmission (meaning “what has been transmitted from the past”), message and tradition are ideas with fundamental meanings in Vattimo’s philosophical dictionary. Cultural tradition and its mode of existence are in fact models of the truth and the experience of being in general. Here Vattimo alludes to the Heideggerian differentiation between *Tradition*, meaning tradition accepted passively or uncreatively, and *Geschick*, the living and relevant inheritance that has a crucial influence on *Dasein* as being towards death.⁵⁵ Here Vattimo also refers to Gadamer’s reflections from *Truth and Method*, particularly to the final identification of being with language or with speech.⁵⁶ The experience of the world is given to the human being in language, not understood as communication, but rather as the transmission of various forms of culture, values, meanings, models, texts and works.

Therefore, for weak thought, being is always given through various mediations. It “opens up” in the contexts and transmitted traditions of culture, history and speech. The rejection of the “strong” conception of being also implies the rejection of the correspondence or adequation conception of truth as the conformity of judgments with being as it exists prior to thought, ideas and language – in other words, with being as “hard” fact or objective reality. Truth is

However, *envoi* is not identified with pure presence either, with essence as *Anwesenheit*, which would precede it and form its origin. Instead, it is infinite sending, a trace, without beginning, multiple, possible thanks to difference and otherness: “Everything begins by referring back [*par le renvoi*], that is to say, does not begin. Given that this effraction or this partition divides every *renvoi* from the start, there is not a single *renvoi* but from then on, always, a multiplicity of *renvois*, so many different traces referring back to other traces and to traces of others. This divisibility of the *envoi* has nothing negative about it, it is not a lack, it is altogether different from subject, signifier, or the letter that Lacan says does not tolerate partition and always arrives at destination. This divisibility or this differance is the condition for there being any *envoi*, possibly an *envoi* of Being, a dispensation or a gift of being and time, of the present and of representation” (p. 127). “Sending,” or “*envoi*,” would seem to be – alongside the “gift” and the “trace” – among the most important concepts of post-metaphysical philosophy, which attempts to think about being outside categories of presence and representation. Derrida writes more on the “gift” in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

55 See: Heidegger, Martin, *Bycie i czas*, trans. into the Polish by B. Baran (Warszawa: PWN, 2004), pp. 27, 485; Vattimo, Gianni, *Koniec nowoczesności [The End of Modernity]*, trans. into the Polish by M. Surma-Gawłowska (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), pp. 141, 143; Vattimo, “Dialektyka, różnica, myśl słaba,” pp. 129, 131, 136.

56 Especially the third part of *Truth and Method*, entitled “The ontological shift of hermeneutics guided by language.” See Vattimo’s commentary in *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, trans. John R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

not a logical or metaphysical procedure, nor is it understood as a scientific procedure of verification, the result of which is self-evidence [*evidentia*] or certitude [*certum*]. It is not based on an objective, adequate description of an objective state of things, which might replace less adequate or already “worn-out” descriptions liable to falsification. Instead it is based on a response to the historically changeable sense of being as occurrence (and not as permanent, unchangeable foundation, structure, basis).⁵⁷ This conception of truth at the root of weak thought is above all the legacy of the radical hermeneutics of Nietzsche and Heidegger. It is closer to the broad sense of the existential conception of truth, where truth is not understood as description or discovery, but as being true, or as a conception of manifestation, which treats truth as a domain of freedom or opening.

It seems that – regardless of the concrete instances of strong thought given, or rather thrown out in passing, by Vattimo – strong thought may be interpreted on the whole as epistemology, when epistemology is treated as a philosophy of representations interested above all in how the world – things, phenomena and beings – appear to the human mind. This might be in the form of the Cartesian *res extensae* opposed to thinking substance, or of Kantian phenomena, which are the mere product of a grid of categories imposed on reality, or of the representations of classical idealist philosophy, or of the Husserlian noemas and senses, which are the result of the noetical acts of the subject, or, finally – in the structuralist version – of sign objects differentiating and ordering the operations performed by systems and structures.

The *addio* that Vattimo directs at strong thought is therefore, above all, a farewell to epistemology and its modern variants. But what comes after epistemology? The author of *The End of Modernity* points to three basic alternatives to the epistemological, “strong” relation to being, three paths along which weak thought might progress, three languages that might replace the language of epistemology, and – in the most general terms – three models of truth and the experiencing of truth. Their common characteristic is an opposition to the scientific and methodical model based on the conception of the conformity of thought and being, though one might also note significant differences between them. Vattimo also does not treat them all in the same manner; rather, he distances himself from some of them, treats others with approval, and alters his assessment somewhat depending on what phase his thought happens to be in.

57 Vattimo, *Oltre l'interpretazione. Il significato dell'ermeneutica per la filosofia* (Bari: Laterza, 1995), p. 98.

The first of these models may be defined as rhetorical-pragmatic, with Gadamer as its patron on the background of hermeneutical philosophy. Vattimo presents this model most broadly in “Truth and Rhetoric in Hermeneutical Ontology” from *The End of Modernity*. Here truth is understood as a persuasive and interpretive procedure, the establishment of which always happens within defined historical and cultural horizons or contexts and in the clash between various discourse and language games. Truth means referring to shared consciousness, language-*logos*, forms of life, continuity of collective existence, tradition, the sphere of ethicality (in Heidegger’s sense), to “a shared and linguistically shaped world possessing characteristics of rationality.”⁵⁸ It is not eternally certain or self-evident, it is not given in the act of individual intuition (despite what the philosophy of consciousness has declared); rather, it has a public character and submits to negotiations.

However, this rhetorical-pragmatic model, in spite of certain points of convergence with Vattimo’s radical hermeneutical conceptions, is guilty – according to Vattimo – of excessive conservatism. Because of this, it risks losing the critical potential of hermeneutical thought inherent in the thinking of its twentieth-century founder, Martin Heidegger. The remedy to problems associated with the “conservative” and “conformist” understanding of truth offered by the rhetorical-pragmatic model is art and artistic experience as a more “revolutionary” model of truth, which leads us to the second model of truth on the foundation of weak thought, which is based on aesthetic and artistic experience. Whereas the rhetorical-pragmatic model questioned, above all, the idea of truth as certitude and self-evidence independent of the experience of tradition, culture and language, the aesthetic-artistic model treats truth not as an objective description of a pre-existing reality attained through methodical and inter-subjective procedures, but rather as the uncovering or revealing of unmanifested areas of being. This process is possible thanks to the act of individual expression and creation based not on rules and norms beyond the individual, but on his creation of his own rules. This model has a decidedly more “anarchic” character than the rhetorical-pragmatic model, and it understands the experience of truth not as an inscription into tradition, continuity, rootedness or negotiation, but rather as break, novelty or revelation.

For this reason, art also occupies an important place in Vattimo’s attempts to construct a model of truth different from the metaphysical model – in other words, different from the classical correspondence model of truth. Vattimo emphasizes the role of artistic experience as an experience of truth beyond method, in which art is not understood autonomously or “aesthetically,” but

58 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 122.

rather treated as a model for truth, knowledge, a meeting of the historical worlds of the creator and the receiver, the work and the interpretation – and thus, in the hermeneutical perspective, treating truth as event.⁵⁹ Art thus provides a model for learning and thinking about history, but also about truth, which can compete with the scientific, theoretical, epistemological, technological model. Truth is no longer understood as the conformity of judgment with reality, but as opening, the coming of Being into existence, a showing forth (here Vattimo is again following Heidegger) in the work of art. History, including the history of science, does not take the form of a unidirectional, progressive and cumulative development, but instead is ruled by a logic close to the logic of artistic revolutions, of the sudden exchange of one set of canons and paradigms for another, which undermines the power of such categories as progress or overcoming, *Überwindung*, in favor of *Verwindung*. This “aestheticization” of science and experience – which leads to the treatment of scientific theories as peculiar works of art, enclosed within themselves, governed according to their own rules, which do not demand verification by reference to the external world, but only by immanent principles of coherence – is a rather traditional theme appearing frequently in modernist thinking about science. In this understanding, the veracity of a work of art and of artistic experience approaches the existential and manifestational understanding of truth, and is quite clearly based on such categories as invention, originality or genius – especially in the Kantian sense, whereby the act of genius is creativity in accordance with one’s own individual rules.

It is worth emphasizing the fact that the sphere of aesthetic experience, serving as a paradigm for thinking about historicity in general, confirms its central role in modernity and is burdened, as Vattimo writes in *The End of Modernity*, with its own “responsibility.” Therefore, it goes beyond the sphere of autonomy strictly understood and approaches the sphere of ethical experience.⁶⁰

Finally, the third model – which Vattimo investigated least intensively and is noticeable mainly in his late works devoted to religion – suggests truth understood as love, friendship-*amicitia*, *caritas*. The experience of truth here is neither an intellectual nor a persuasive procedure. Nor is it the revelatory or creative gesture of the individual. Instead, it takes on the form of ethical responsibility towards the other.⁶¹

59 Vattimo, “Dialektyka, różnica, myśl słaba”; Vattimo, *Etica dell’interpretazione*, pp. 187-204; Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, pp. 82-101.

60 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 88.

61 See: Vattimo, *Credere di credere* (Milano: 1996); *Dopo cristianesimo* (Milano: 2002).

Weak Thought in the Context of Philosophical and Cultural Tradition

The “weakness” of thought in the face of existence also means a withdrawal from the project, in both senses given above, although this separation from the social, emancipatory-utopian aspect of this type of thought clearly does not come easily to Vattimo. Weak thought does not so much create its own projects, or build comprehensive visions and interpretations of the world, as it makes use of what it finds. This particular motif – of a peculiarly understood relation to tradition and predecessors – is one of the most interesting and original themes in the Vattimo’s critique of metaphysics. In the article “Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought,” he characterizes weak thought against the backdrop of the two major philosophical currents indicated in the title: dialectics, which according to Vattimo is represented in the twentieth century by Sartre and Benjamin, and the philosophy of difference, whose main representative is, of course, Heidegger with his idea of the ontic-ontological difference between Being and beings.

Weak thinking thus maintains ambivalent relations with these two major traditions of thought. Weak thought differentiates itself from them, but does not simply leave them outside its range, abolish them or overcome them in some quasi-dialectical movement. Just as the philosophy of difference “vaccinates itself,” so to speak, in the very heart of the dialectical project, developing and accenting the motif of negativity within itself, of that which escapes totalization and appropriation, weak thinking also “parasitizes” the philosophy of difference and dialectics. Weak thought develops the former, to which it owes everything, while at the same time constantly recalling – or even dwelling upon – the latter, absorbing some of its themes, particularly “self-disintegrative” and ethical themes, as well as certain reflections on the subject of history and its “dissolution into the specific human beings who create it.”⁶² “The passage from difference into weak thought can be thought only when the legacy of dialectics is also accepted,” Vattimo concludes.⁶³ Therefore, dialectics and the philosophy of difference function in the paper under discussion as members of a triad, whose third element is weak thought. In this way, one might with some justification (though certainly against Vattimo’s own intentions) discern in Vattimo’s manner of presenting their mutual relations certain echoes of thinking in the categories of evolution, development, the linear progression of history, etc.

The issue of dialectics and the philosophy of difference had already become the subject of critical reflection for Vattimo much earlier, beginning at least in the 1980s. A return to his discussion of these two traditions is indispensable

62 Vattimo, “Dialektyka, różnica, myśl słaba,” p. 131.

63 Ibid., p.130.

both to the full understanding of the place they occupy within weak thought, and to the grasping of certain essential characteristics of weak thought itself; it is also crucial to the more extensive sketching out of the context from which it grows, and which it submits to characteristic reinterpretations. Moreover, it seems that the evolution of Vattimo's views on dialectical philosophy and the philosophy of difference can be well observed in his successive reinterpretations of Nietzsche's thought.

The Weakening of Nietzsche

Nietzsche's philosophy, together with Heidegger's thought, is the basic source of inspiration for the conception of weak thought – in all its variants and aspects – as developed by Vattimo. This weak ontology – which is supposed to express the experience of being characteristic for the world of late (fulfilled) modernity – assumes an understanding of being not in the broadly defined “strong” categories of essence, structure, or objectively and independently existing reality – not in a full and authentic way. On the contrary, it assumes an understanding of being in the weak categories of the trace, the remnant, that which is left over from the full and inviolate presence, or rather self-presence, of being. This ontology is to a significant extent identifiable with the idea of nihilism, specifically with the interpretation of nihilism presented by Nietzsche and later – following in his footsteps – by Heidegger. Broadly speaking, this interpretation treats nihilism not as a chance cultural phenomenon, but as an event in being itself, a way in which being manifests itself or gives itself to understanding in the era of the end of metaphysics – an era identifiable in broad terms with the end of modernity. Vattimo's philosophy is predicated both on the Heideggerian claim that nothing remains of being (as he suggests in his lectures on Nietzsche) and Nietzschean active nihilism, or the conviction that there are no facts, only interpretations.

Vattimo is one of the most interesting contemporary interpreters of Nietzsche, although unfortunately he is almost unknown and very rarely cited in this role in Poland. Yet the way in which he reads and understands Nietzsche's writings is essential in our understanding not only of how these writings have influenced the conception of weak thought and Vattimo's own philosophy, but also of the history of philosophy in general, and more specifically, of how philosophers received Nietzscheanism in the second half of the twentieth century. In practice, these aspects of Vattimo's approach to Nietzsche are difficult to separate. Among the many texts the Italian philosopher devoted to Nietzsche, very few take the form of classical, historico-philosophical reconstructions. The majority of them – especially those dating from Vattimo's

later period – serve to a large extent as a point of departure for the construction and development of his own philosophical position. Vattimo is certainly a “strong” (in other words, original, consistent, but also controversial) reader of Nietzsche. It is also difficult in his case to speak of a single, comprehensive and closed interpretation of Nietzsche. He repeatedly returns to certain motifs in Nietzsche’s philosophy – such as the role and status of art, the figure of the *Übermensch*, and nihilism – subjecting them to various reinterpretations, and these continually renewed readings of Nietzsche and confrontations with his thought may serve as a characteristic example of the philosophical transformations in Vattimo’s own views. Broadly speaking, Vattimo’s interpretations evolved from readings attempting to situate Nietzsche in the context of certain currents in dialectical philosophy to perspectives presenting Nietzsche as a hermeneutical philosopher.

Nietzsche, Marx, Emancipation

The basic theme of Vattimo’s *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e la problema della liberazione* (The Subject and the Mask: Nietzsche and the Problem of Liberation),⁶⁴ published in 1974, is a double emancipation: a liberation of the symbolic sphere in the broadest sense – in other words, the senses, values, cultural forms created by man, as well as images and interpretations of the world – and a closely related liberation of man himself from structures of power and domination. This liberation can occur only through the overcoming of the traditional metaphysical oppositions of being and sense, depth and surface, external and internal, form and content. Vattimo seeks ways to abolish these dichotomies in Nietzsche’s most important motifs and figures of thought, such as the genealogy, eternal return, the *Übermensch*, and the will to power.

Vattimo interprets the Nietzschean idea of the genealogy somewhat differently from Foucault in the well-known text “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” although we might note certain similarities between their approaches. According to Foucault, the genealogy – which is close to his own project of the archeology – is a historical analysis revealing the illusory nature of classical

64 Vattimo, Gianni, *Il soggetto e la maschera: Nietzsche e la problema della liberazione* (Milano: Bompiani, 1974). Hereinafter citations will be referenced from this edition with the letters “SM,” followed by the page number, in parentheses. Citations from *Dialogo con Nietzsche: Saggi 1961-2000* (Milano: Garzanti, 2000) will be referenced in parentheses with the letters “DN” followed by the page number.

metaphysical ideas, such as beginning, origin, subject, truth and nature.⁶⁵ All of these express a need for unity, permanence, sense and identity, thus attempting to eliminate contradiction, otherness and nonsense. The archeologist's gaze uncovers from under this apparent unity places of discontinuity, rupture, difference and contradiction. He reveals history not as a teleological process, or as a constant striving towards a goal or a closure that will put an end to all happening and give it ultimate meaning, but rather as pure becoming, movement and change, thus revealing the relative character of all images of the world regarded as stable and unchangeable. In place of the unpolluted purity and originality of the beginning, he sets up conflict and contradiction.⁶⁶ Under the apparent unity of the subject, he discovers a complexity of roles, masks, and drives that undermine any "strong" identity. Finally, he treats interpretation not as an uncovering of meaning, but as a struggle for domination, for control over meanings, rules, ideas, morality, whose traces can be read from the surface – from a corporeality entangled in history and "stigmatized" by it.

Vattimo too underlines the fact that Nietzschean genealogy is aimed at metaphysics and its fundamentalist tendencies, especially the idea of the "thing in-itself" (SM 142-143, 146). Vattimo alludes to a passage from *The Gay Science* claiming that the most profound people value the skin of things most highly, the fact that they possess a surface, defining this as a love for the surface of things.⁶⁷ According to Foucault, medicine and the doctor's gaze provide the model of the genealogical sensitization to what is on the surface or near. This model is juxtaposed with the abstract gaze of the metaphysicist, directed towards what is lofty and remote. However, for Vattimo, the model is art, which is the realm of the phenomenal side of reality, of appearance, though appearance treated independently and autonomously, liberated from the opposition with the supposed truth or depth of the thing in-itself. Vattimo emphasizes one crucial aspect in the genealogical approach that is absent in Foucault's interpretation. For Foucault, though he does not say so directly, seems to treat the genealogy as a kind of critical unmasking of certain mental fictions. Admittedly this is not carried out in the name of a metaphysical or adequate understanding of the truth, as the conformity of judgment with some objectively existing state of

65 See: Foucault, Michel, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977).

66 This motif can also be found in Deleuze's work (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 2-3): "Genealogy signifies the differential element of values from which their value itself derives. Genealogy thus means origin or birth, but also difference or distance in the origin."

67 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 38.

things. Nevertheless, it has a reductive character, because it seeks unity, continuity and identity beneath the appearances, and thus to suppress multiplicity, discontinuity and heterogeneity. Finally, it reduces metaphysical illusions to the element of history as pure becoming. However, it appears that this gesture of reversing metaphysics and dismissing the idea of being as that which is unchangeable and extra-historical results in a certain absolutization of history, and causes it to resemble the very same idea of a basis, beginning, or *fons et origo*, to which it was supposedly opposed.

Vattimo's approach seems to be free of this danger, since he strongly juxtaposes the genealogy with various forms of unmasking. Thought that seeks to unmask, related to the philosophy of suspicion, constitutes a critique of metaphysics from positions external to metaphysics, in the name of a better, more adequate description of the structure of reality. This form of unmasking is itself unmasked by Nietzsche. The only possible form of critique of decadence or metaphysics is a critique from within, from a point of view that itself necessarily belongs to the unmasked world, the bringing of unmasked forms to self-negation with the aid of the very means and ideas developed by them. This unmasking of unmasking (*smascheramento dello smascheramento*), as Vattimo puts it, no longer has the aim of exposing and dispensing with errors in the name of truth, or of developing a more adequate description or interpretation of reality; rather, it treats them as the heritage and treasure of humanity, a realm of meanings constitutive of man's world. To speak metaphysically, unmasking would depend not on the removing of masks with the aim of uncovering what is beneath them, but on collecting them, with an awareness that – precisely as masks – they are the only reality that exists and is accessible to knowledge.⁶⁸ Accordingly, Vattimo distinguishes two masks in Nietzsche's work: the bad mask, meaning one that is frozen into the appearance of unchanging truth or stable, "immobile" structure of being and thus blocks the productivity of the symbolic order, and the good mask, which supposes activeness, free production of cultural and symbolic forms free of reference to an apparent transcendence or "depth."

Here I shall continue to present Vattimo's views. The linear structure of time also has a repressive character. The past is marked by power, domination and violence in two senses: first, as the dimension of what has happened or taken place, thus having the character of "hard" fact, of that which is unchangeable, irreversible and therefore authoritative (SM 258, 262, 264); and

68 This theme is crucial for Vattimo's later thought and will find its development in his reflections on the Heideggerian ideas of *Verwindung*, or overcoming, *Andenken*, recollection, as well as the monument or *pietas*.

second, as the story of particular, historical relations of power and domination. A spirit of revenge directed against both these forms of oppression is also associated with the linear structure of time. This takes on various forms. It can be found in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, but also in the Oedipal revolt against the father. However, it always retains its basic reactive structure, which essentially makes free creativity impossible, since it objectifies it and dialectically combines it with the same forms of repression against which it was directed.⁶⁹ In the end, the human being can be truly free only when he or she does not possess a past as an enslaving burden of facts and authority (SM 270).

The concept of the eternal return of the same is a liberation from this repressive structure of time as structure of power. Vattimo's interpretation of this difficult, and variously interpreted motif in Nietzsche's philosophy is both interesting and original. In the traditional, linear conception of time, the meaning or sense of history is transcendent to the event, or, as Vattimo puts it, to the elements of process, becoming, or history (SM 182). Eternal return, on the other hand, brings a unification of being and meaning – in other words, the abolition of transcendence. Therefore, it has a liberating, emancipatory meaning. Much like active nihilism, it assumes not simply the negation of sense – since then it would still be marked by the reactive character of dialectics or metaphysics in general – but by a positive identification of the event and meaning (SM 215). Therefore, Vattimo interprets the figure of eternal return not so much in the context of the philosophy of temporality, as a negation of the linear character of time, or a rejection of the idea of progress in the name of a return to some mythical, cyclical conception of time, but rather as a rejection of transcendence, a confirmation that every moment possesses an immanent sense, its own meaning within itself, not in the past or the future as if it came from some metaphysical source or were moving towards fulfillment or an end (SM 208-209). Only if each moment contains its entire sense within itself, and not beyond itself, is it possible to desire it to constantly return anew, since only then is it not merely an element in a chain in which only the beginning, the *arche*, or the end, *telos*, are essential or granted the fullness of meaning (SM 207).

The doctrine of eternal return, as Vattimo emphasizes, is not a “real” description of the structure of the world, but a mode of existence for the future, liberated and happy human being, as well as a project for the future world to be built (SM 207, 211). It is characteristic that, in his interpretation, Vattimo refers

69 Deleuze also focuses attention on the reactive character of dialectics in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*.

quite clearly here to the category of the project and uses the “emancipatory” lexicon of progress and liberation.⁷⁰

In Vattimo, eternal return is also associated with a new conception of the subject, since it assumes the rejection of subject-object dualism (SM 216), the subject of traditional philosophy of consciousness and the Kantian project of the transcendental subject. It is closer to the subject understood from the perspective of corporeality, or to the Heideggerian idea of *Dasein* as historical, finite being thrown into the world (SM 218). In Vattimo’s opinion, the classical subject is above all characterized by repression, and essentially mirrors the social structure of power and domination. Viewed as unity and identity, it turns out really to be a fiction, but it works like the repressive social order, since it suppresses the multiplicity and diversity of instincts, drives, and all those spheres of personality that fall outside the control of consciousness and rationality (SM 227, 234, 239).

The concrete, historical incarnation of these philosophical conceptions of subjectivity is the human person of contemporary, technocratic society, dominated by the *ratio* – in other words, the subject, which Vattimo defines, somewhat peculiarly, as the “Christian-bourgeois subject” [*soggetto cristiano-borghese*]. This subject lives in a condition that separates sense from being, since he always places the sense of his existence – in accordance with the Platonic ideal and traditional Christian morality – beyond concrete, individual existence, and in the sphere of transcendence understood in various ways (SM 285).

Vattimo finds in Nietzsche’s writings not only a penetrating critique of traditional subjectivity, but also an attempt to construct a new subjectivity, free from metaphysical illusions, repression, the instinct for revenge and resentment. The model of this subjectivity is to be the *Übermensch*, who reconciles within himself being and sense, event and meaning, the sphere of facts and the sphere of values, who does not passively accept the symbolic systems he finds, but is capable of free creativity and the independent creation of value and of his own existence (SM 214, 317). The figure of the *Übermensch* signifies the liberation of an activeness, thanks to which man may rule over the world, and the liberation of the symbols that are to serve this goal – symbols that until now have alienated man and inspired fear and uncertainty (SM 292). Finally, the *Übermensch* signifies the restoration of meaning to immanence and its return to man. From this perspective, values are no longer treated as fetishes

70 Vattimo interprets eternal return somewhat differently in his texts of the 1960s, before *Il soggetto e la maschera*. There, it serves for a liberation from the malady of historicism, passive nihilism, the instinct of revenge and the banal, linear image of time (DN 27, 30, 38-42). Here, however, he does not mention eternal return in the context of abolishing the opposition between being and meaning.

or consolidated cultural forms, but as meanings inherent in things themselves. The *Übermensch* is a free creator of his own world and symbolic orders, while the sphere of symbols gives him a comprehensive, unifying – which does not mean singular or universal – existential sense (SM 300). He does not create reactively, but freely. His action flows out of the surplus and creative power within himself.

Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche's idea of the will to power seems to a large extent to be a polemical reaction to Heidegger's interpretation, where the will to power, treated as the essence of being, is the fulfillment of the whole of Western metaphysics, and signifies the reign of the modern subject over being, a reign finding its expression in technology and in the technological organization of the world.⁷¹ Vattimo attempts to present the will to power not as a metaphysical, stable structure of being, life or history, but rather as a chance for the liberation of the symbolic sphere. His interpretation is based on the category of progress: only in the technocratic world does the will to power signify metaphysical and real violence, while in the coming world of the *Übermensch* it will only be a radical perspectivism, a clash of multiple points of view, immersed in the hermeneutical process and based on a belief in the interpretive character of reality (SM 361-367). Things are similar with science and technology: they do not have to imply the domination of the subject over the world, or the brutal exploitation of the world typical, in Vattimo's opinion, of capitalist society. They also have – or at least they can have – a positive character, since they make the coming of the *Übermensch* possible in an objective way and, purified of metaphysical residue and violence, allow free human creativity to be liberated (SM 346-347).

Above, I reconstructed in brief the basic themes of Vattimo's interpretation of Nietzsche. Now it is time for this question: what image of the German thinker really emerges from *Il Soggetto e la maschera*? One might answer that it is an anti-dialectical Nietzsche that emerges, though one that is inconsistently and partially anti-dialectical, since in fact he is read against Hegel and together with Marx. This is a Nietzsche torn out of the dialectical scheme and the scheme of his basic rhetorical figures, yet still constantly plunged back into this scheme by being interpreted in the context of an emancipatory discourse. The critical references to Hegel scattered throughout *Il soggetto e la maschera* can be reduced to three basic threads. The first of these is a critique of the idea of unity (though, characteristically, not of totalization) as a reduction of difference and multiplicity – both the initial unity constituting the point of departure for the

71 Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche* (Warszawa: PWN, 1998), Volume 1, pp. 639-648; Volume 2, p. 26.

dialectical process and the final unity that is the end and culmination (SM 78). The second thread is a critique of the master-slave dialectic, interpreted as a “rupture” between being and sense, as a conflict whose basis lies in a state whereby consciousness does not possess its own essence and in the attempt to find this essence through the mediation of other consciousnesses.⁷² Finally, the third thread, closely associated with the second, is a critique of the Hegelian idea of unhappy consciousness, which Vattimo compares with the Nietzschean “reactive” spirit of revenge (SM 270-281).

Vattimo’s method of interpreting the relation of Nietzsche’s philosophy to that of Hegel clearly resembles a kind of dialectical abolition or overcoming: firstly, of the phenomenological method by the genealogy (SM 93), and, secondly, of the rupture between being and the sphere of senses and values presented by the Hegelian figures of unhappy consciousness and the master-slave conflict by the Nietzschean idea of the *Übermensch*, which is capable of uniting these oppositions. However, Vattimo cannot deny that the *Übermensch*, understood in this way, greatly resembles the Hegelian Absolute Spirit, though in existentialism and especially in Marxism he seeks out motifs that might “protect” this Nietzschean figure – so important in his interpretation – from being absorbed by the dialectical scheme (SM 317). The first of these traditions allows the reconciliation of being and sense to be seen not in an abstract historical moment, but rather in a concrete individual. The second allows Vattimo to find the concrete, historical and political meaning of the Nietzschean metaphors and to interpret the *Übermensch* as a new subject, who is to arise as a result of revolutionary social transformations that will abolish traditional forms of enslavement, especially the division of labor (SM 287, 213). In this interpretation, the *Übermensch* appears as a subject capable of both abolishing the mechanisms of alienation and taking control of – and appropriating – his own essence in the course of history.

Therefore, Vattimo – once again despite his own declarations – “unmasks” both Nietzsche’s texts and the biography of the philosopher himself. He gives his writings an “appropriate” sense, while presenting Nietzsche himself as a peculiar kind of false consciousness/bourgeois intellectual, one who is – admittedly – in revolt against bourgeois ideology, but who is still isolated from the real revolutionary and emancipatory movement through which he would be

72 A similar problem is confronted by the Kierkegaardian idea of “the despairing wish to be oneself,” which is based on the fact that the subject considers itself to be authentic when it identifies with a model [See: Kierkegaard, Soren, *Choroba na śmierć*, trans. J. Iwaszkiewicz (Warszawa: PWN, 1995), p.21], as well as in the phenomenon of triangular desire described by René Girard in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, which demonstrates the mediated nature of what are supposedly the subject’s own desires.

capable of grasping the historical moment and its truth (SM 184-186; 374). Thus the allegorical, metaphorical and hazy nature and style of many of Nietzsche's works, such as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, receives a dual interpretation from Vattimo: it reflects both the attempt to create a new philosophical language and the philosopher's inability to break away from metaphysics towards political and historical reality (SM 175-187).

Therefore, Marx helps Vattimo to "put Nietzsche on his feet," though the price for this is high. Firstly, despite the declared anti-Hegelianism of Vattimo's interpretation, in *Il Soggetto e la maschera* Nietzsche remains imprisoned within the circle of dialectical philosophy. Secondly, the ambiguity of Nietzsche's thought is reduced to a single, "emancipatory" thread. In any case, Vattimo seeks out the development and transformations of this thread throughout Nietzsche's thought.⁷³ He believes in the unified meaning of Nietzsche's writings, and considers the reconstruction of this meaning to be a necessary and justified operation (SM 343). This kind of interpretive approach puts a question mark over all the "pluralistic" and anti-dialectical motifs of his reading. Thus, as a reader of Nietzsche, Vattimo proceeds in the opposite way to Derrida, who accents in *Spurs* the open, fragmentary and aphoristic nature of Nietzsche's writings, which are deprived of any singular, final truth or meaning. In this way, they "unsaddle" the interpreter and undermine any attempted readings aiming at the unification or unambiguous capturing of meanings.⁷⁴

Between Dialectical Reason and Hermeneutical Reason

Such a strong grounding (one might even say "tailoring") of Nietzsche in the dialectical context ensures that, in *Il soggetto e la maschera*, Vattimo clearly cuts off his interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy from the hermeneutical ontology originating in Heidegger. This ontology imposes a reactive, spiritualistic, idealistic, mythological and false ontologization of the end of metaphysics, treating it as an event in being itself, which hampers the search for ways to transform social structures on the path to political changes (SM 310-

73 In *Al di là del soggetto* (p. 21), Vattimo himself, to a large extent, dismissed his own "strong" theses on the subject of Nietzsche, writing that his interpretation had been too dialectical, treating the figure of the *Übermensch* as a variant of Absolute Spirit or of man liberated from the mechanisms of alienation.

74 See: Derrida, Jacques, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Vattimo refers to Derrida's interpretation in his 1992 text "Zarathustra" (included in *Dialogo con Nietzsche*), emphasizing that the enigmatic, anti-systemic character of the text takes on meaning in the context of deconstructionist reading and anti-metaphysical philosophy.

316). Nonetheless, it is worth recalling this early, “dialectical” Vattimo, especially since he is now regarded as the main representative of hermeneutical philosophy, and in its most radical variant.

Vattimo’s views of dialectics and the way of interpreting reality presented by dialectics have undergone a characteristic evolution. In *Le avventure della differenza*, he clearly wavers between dialectical and hermeneutical philosophy, attempting to reconcile Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s thought with the conceptions of the later Sartre in particular. Vattimo treats both these intellectual currents as equal and equally relevant sources of inspiration for his own reflections, as attempts to go beyond metaphysics and the philosophy of representation based on metaphysics, as well as to liberate the world of symbols from subordination to a previously existing reality.⁷⁵

In *Le avventure della differenza* Vattimo opposes “dialectical reason” [*ragione dialettica*] to “hermeneutical reason” [*ragione ermeneutica*], to use the title of one of the book’s most important chapters. As representatives of the latter, Vattimo includes Gadamer, Ricoeur and Palmer, as well as the French post-structuralists (Jacques Derrida, Giles Deleuze, Michel Foucault), and even Lacan. Such a broad vision of contemporary hermeneutical ontology might justifiably give rise to certain doubts. After all, Vattimo elides – undoubtedly on purpose, consciously, in order to simplify the picture – the profound and crucial differences that undeniably separate the intellectual traditions comprising it, while the “hermeneutical nature” of the philosophies mentioned can be limited to a few basic and general indicators, such as an acceptance of the hermeneutic circle, the rejection of the ideal of the objectivity of historical knowledge, a belief in the linguistic mediation of reality and of being.

The image of contemporary hermeneutic thought Vattimo constructs, or rather sketches out, can be justified both in polemical terms – since he submits this tradition to moderate critique, emphasizing his partial distance from it – and in substantive terms. The point of departure for Vattimo’s own meditations is his interpretation of Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*, which is famously devoted to history and historical consciousness. The author of *The Birth of Tragedy* appears as a somewhat ambivalent hero in Vattimo’s text, since he is shown as a thinker from a watershed period, standing at the crossroads of two eras, in part stuck in the nineteenth century, but also heralding new, thoroughly twentieth-century tendencies in thought. On the one hand, in Nietzschean attempts to overcome nineteenth-century historicism Vattimo sees its paradoxical confirmation. Nietzsche, through his criticism of the historical malady – the excess of historical consciousness, which paralyzes and makes any action or

75 Vattimo, Gianni, *Le avventure della differenza* (Milano: Garzanti, 1980), p. 42.

creation of a new history impossible – remains, in a certain sense, a Hegelian prisoner. This is the case in the genesis and model of his thinking and of the oppositions created by him, since this model assumes that it is precisely the rupture between action and thinking (or consciousness), between theory and practice, existence and meaning, and – on the most basic level – between being in itself and being for itself, that forms the causal factor in history. On the other hand, Vattimo finds in Nietzsche solutions that are not available to twentieth-century hermeneutical thought, as the Italian philosopher understands it, and which expose certain crucial weaknesses within it.

The basic charge Vattimo levels against the representatives of hermeneutical ontology concerns their entanglement in the very metaphysics they strive – unsuccessfully, in his view – to overcome. This entanglement manifests itself in an inability to defeat the malady of historicism, which in this case is based on a dissonance between theory and practice, knowledge and action, through which the sphere of historical and social *praxis* is condemned to become a “blind” and unconscious force, separated from the sphere of meanings, projects and the rational activity of human beings. Hermeneutics only superficially solves the problem of the opposition between action and thought, being and consciousness; it makes assumptions about the hermeneutical nature of existence and the primacy of language in the experience of being, but in fact merely passes over and “pushes out” this problem. These efforts are unsuccessful because the problem returns in the form of a central theme for hermeneutics: the finite nature of existence and the corresponding infinite nature of interpretive horizons. This pair of correlated and inseparable ideas assumes, according to Vattimo, the separation of existence and meaning, and ultimately it is merely a different version of the Hegelian opposition between being for-itself and being in-itself. Hermeneutical thought still moves within the area marked out by this opposition, since – for fear of the “closure” and immobilization of history in the manacles of sense, presence, final fulfillment or the full transparency of Absolute Spirit – it falls into the other extreme; that is, it treats history as pure becoming, pure existence in the finite dimension, deprived of any meaning, separated from the sphere of meaning (or meanings), or even as the circulation of linguistic messages.

Therefore, the hermeneutical ontology of Heidegger’s students and successors, in Vattimo’s opinion, constitutes a step back in relation to Heidegger’s radical conception of the historicity of being and his dramatic vision of Western civilization, according to which our contemporary experience and knowledge are, as a result of their metaphysical character, afflicted by an insurmountable forgetting of being. Hermeneutical thought, on the other hand, represents a softened, optimistic, or “irenistic” – as Vattimo calls it – version of

the Heideggerian account of being. Admittedly, hermeneutical thought does acknowledge that every form of knowledge takes the shape of an open, infinite process of interpretation, yet at the same time it sees in this process the act of creating a new history, of grafting on new meanings, senses and interpretations. The Heideggerian ontology of understanding and interpretation turns into a methodology for the interpretation of texts, particularly in Gadamer's work. In any case, it seems that Vattimo's above-mentioned charges against hermeneutical philosophy can be applied most fully to the author of *Truth and Method*, and only to a much lesser extent to the French post-structuralists, who treat hermeneutics in a much more radical manner.

However, hermeneutical ontology is also, one might add, a step back in relation to Nietzsche, even in relation to his early thinking from the period of *Untimely Meditations*. For in Nietzsche's writings, the historical malady – the excess of historical consciousness that causes an inability to create new history – is not opposed to “blind” activity, devoid of any reference to the sphere of meanings, but rather to a striving towards the unity of various practical manifestations of a concrete society, defined as a unity of artistic style. Moreover, the figure of the *Übermensch* developed by Nietzsche in his mature writings is here interpreted by Vattimo – much like in *Il soggetto e la maschera* – precisely as an attempt to construct a new subject, who would be capable of overcoming the opposition between existence and meaning, action and knowledge. Therefore, this subject would be capable of reconciling the contradictions and, at the same time, of experiencing absolute knowledge, though – as Vattimo strongly emphasizes – only in history and in a historical manner; that is, in such a way as to not fall simultaneously into the Hegelian trap of a finalism and totalization abolishing the movement of history. However, in spite of Vattimo's own declarations and intentions, such an interpretation of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* clearly brings the figure closer to dialectics and also to the philosophy of consciousness. This so-called “new” subject – treated as a free and entirely unlimited creator of meanings, fully capable of experiencing the freedom of the symbolic sphere and its independence from the limitations of “real,” objective reality that restricts the sphere of creativity – appears to be merely another, somewhat more “modernized” version of the modern, “strong” subject, who constitutes himself and his reality, thus experiencing himself in a fully transparent manner, free from any mediations or moments of “negation.”

Therefore, it is no surprise to find that Vattimo places not Marx but Sartre – as the theoretician of a new mode of self-realization and the subject's experiencing of the social spheres of community and intersubjectivity – alongside Nietzsche as defined above. Thus Vattimo ultimately argues for dialectical reason in *Ragione dialettica e ragione ermeneutica* and attempts to

draw the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger into the circle of its influence. He concludes his sketch by referring to the idea of totalization, which – although it remains within the sphere of the future, the project and the unfulfilled – functions as a very particular regulative idea, a point of destination, or perhaps an orienting sign for thought, a sign that alone is capable of redeeming history, giving it sense and direction, and saving it from falling into pure “becoming.” The intended reconciliation of Nietzsche and Heidegger with Sartre – in other words, of dialectics with the philosophy of difference – seems from this point of view to be impossible, which Vattimo admits, though not directly, in his text on weak thought. In the end, even some of his own statements in *Le avventure della differenza* seem to suggest that he has come to realize the difficulties to which such a project inevitably exposes itself. For instance, as early as “An-denken: Il pensare e il fondamento,” he notices that the Heideggerian category of “Andenken” – the remembrance of being, its history and the ontic-ontological difference – is significantly closer to the “tendencies towards disintegration” at the heart of dialectical thought, the conception of negativity understood not as a part of the dialectical mechanism, but as an element “exploding” it, an element that cannot be appropriated and integrated in the dialectical movement, and which makes impossible any totalization, removal of difference, abolition of alienation, full reconciliation – as in Greek sculpture or in the classical and Hegelian ideals of beauty – of the internal and external in human existence.⁷⁶ The conciliatory attempt undertaken by Vattimo to find a common ground for dialectics and the philosophy of difference, in spite of his intentions, does more to illustrate the divergent trends of the twentieth century’s most important intellectual movements than their common points. It also shows how strongly – certainly more strongly than he himself would want to admit – attached Vattimo is (or was in this phase of his thought) to the powerful edifice of dialectical thought and its various aspects, be they purely philosophical or social and political.

The solution proposed at more or less the same time by Noica in *Devenirea întru ființa*, which is based on an attempt to go beyond the opposition between static being (presence, sense) and pure becoming (historicity, finitude) by means of the preposition “*întru*”, seems more consistent and convincing. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, despite appearances, Noica was less attached than Vattimo to dialectics and more resistant to its traps, while his own vision of weak ontology forced him to seek not so much a synthesis of oppositions or a

76 Vattimo, “An-denken: Il pensare e il fondamento,” pp. 142-144. Interestingly, when he writes about negative thought, Vattimo mentions Bataille, Adorno, Bloch and Marcuse, but fails to mention Kojève’s *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.

reconciliation of contraries, but rather to show their internal dynamics and the movement to which they submitted. *Le Avventure della differenza*, which I have been discussing here, can be considered the transitional moment between the “dialectical Nietzsche” and the “hermeneutical Nietzsche” in Vattimo’s thought. From the second half of the 1980s, this second Nietzsche begins to move into the foreground. It is difficult to determine whether we are dealing here with a smooth evolution of Vattimo’s views or a definitive change in the interpretive context. In a self-interpretation from “Il Nietzsche italiano” (in *Dialogo con Nietzsche*), Vattimo himself prefers to emphasize the continuity of his views on the subject of Nietzsche. Admittedly, he confesses that today there is no way to think about the *Übermensch* in dialectical and revolutionary categories, but maintains the basic theses of the book, noting, for instance, a close link between the Marxist theme of abolishing the alienation of the subject and the Heideggerian question of the end of metaphysics. But is the Nietzsche of *Il soggetto e la maschera* truly a thinker of the end of metaphysics, as Vattimo would like to see him? It would seem that he is not, and that the continuity of Vattimo’s interpretation of Nietzsche is more a result of the fact that there are still some remnants of dialectical categories in the work of the “later” Vattimo. This is demonstrated, for example, by his consistently critical attitude towards deconstructionist readings of Nietzsche, which he charges with an “aestheticism” and textualism that fail to take into consideration the political and practical aspects of Nietzsche’s thought (DN 291-295).

Nietzsche, Heidegger, Hermeneutics

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that from the second half of the 1980s crucial changes appear in Vattimo’s readings of Nietzsche, and that these changes accompany the emergence and evolution of the basic themes of weak thought. As emancipatory themes and the question of eternal return retreat into the background, Vattimo places greater importance on Nietzschean aesthetics, the question of nihilism, and hermeneutics. He also subjects the figure of the *Übermensch* to significant reinterpretation.

In *Il soggetto e la maschera*, aesthetic questions play a marginal role; the emancipatory powers of art are treated by Vattimo as an illusion, an oasis of freedom for the symbolic sphere in a society of repression that will lose its particular character once the whole of human activity becomes the free production of meanings (SM 304-306). In “Arte e identità. Sull’attualità dell’estetica di Nietzsche,” Vattimo already perceives the meaning of the Nietzschean reflection on art, which goes beyond the boundaries of traditional aesthetics and is closely associated with the destruction of metaphysics. Two

threads may be distinguished in the Italian philosopher's reflections. The first of these reveals the critical and emancipatory meaning of art in Nietzsche's thought – this time very clearly separated by Vattimo from any other forms of dialectical totalization (DN 165) – as that sphere of human activity which is most capable of undermining the ruling symbolic order, the appointed canons of sense, the socially sanctioned divisions into true and false, the established systems of communication, norms of rationality, etc., on which social organization is based (DN 162, 168). The second thread, though it is linked with the first, accents not so much the social meaning of art as its metaphysical meaning, and announces certain essential motifs of weak thought. What is most essential in the experience of art depends on the undermining and blurring of the Platonic border between reality and appearance – and thus on the “weakening” of the “strong” version of reality and the positive revaluation of appearance (DN 166). Here Vattimo is clearly following in the footsteps of Heidegger, who also emphasized the significance of Nietzsche's thought for his project to overturn Platonism.⁷⁷

The new context in which Vattimo places Nietzsche's thought is the European avant-gardes of the beginning of the twentieth century, treated both as artistic and political movements (DN 137), while – instead of the proletariat, or working class, as collective subject – the place of the *Übermensch* is taken by the artist, or the creative, inventive individual capable of creating projects for his own existence (DN 202). More or less from *The End of Modernity* (1985), art becomes for Vattimo the model of weak thought as an unmethodical, unmetaphysical experience of truth, understood not as conformity of judgment with reality, but as an “opening” to being. However, the problem that these attempts must confront is the fact that Vattimo mainly relies on the experience of avant-garde art, which in fact rejects the classical postulate of imitation, but nonetheless – by accenting such “strong” categories as progress, novelty, the freedom and inventiveness of the creative subject, the deformation of reality, and the idea of the project – remains strongly burdened with metaphysics.

The dialectical or “strong” reading of Nietzsche's thought – which places emphasis on liberating the symbolic sphere, emancipating the subject, and reconciling existential and social contradictions – proves incapable of reflecting the full weight and complexity of the problem of nihilism, which gains its fundamental importance only in the interpretation of Nietzsche as a thinker of the end of metaphysics and a philosopher of interpretation, inspired to a large degree by Heidegger's philosophy. Vattimo does not associate Nietzschean nihilism with the culture of decadence, the malady of historicism, but rather

⁷⁷ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Volume 1, pp. 183-185.

lends it positive meanings. He attempts to “purify” the idea of nihilism of all its metaphysical influences, just as he did earlier with the idea of the will to power.⁷⁸ Therefore, he “weakens” the difference between active and passive nihilism. He also criticizes the “vitalistic” or “energetic” conceptions of active nihilism for the fact that they still remain within the horizon of metaphysical thinking, since they presuppose the category of life as a kind of foundation or basis, as well as assuming a “strong,” inventive subject, capable of the thorough unmasking of ideological illusions and the fully conscious creation of new values, meanings, projects and images of the world (DN 198-199). In Vattimo’s interpretation, Nietzschean nihilism – which in its most fundamental aspects is identical with weak ontology – is not a conscious, subjective gesture of establishing new senses of being, or of creating new interpretations, but rather an event in being itself taking place beyond the horizon of the subject. This event is based on the fact that it loses its “strong” character of basis, foundation or *arche*. Vattimo establishes strong links between this nihilistic strand in Nietzsche’s (and Heidegger’s) thought and the experience of being characteristic of late modernity, which has reached the end of its thought project on the philosophical, historiosophical, social and aesthetic planes.⁷⁹

The subject who is capable of responding to this event, and of fully accompanying it, is the “weak” subject – capable of living his life as devoid of sense and support in metaphysical principles, capable of going beyond egoistic self-preserving instinct (thanks to self-limitation and moderation), capable of treating his own projects as “weak,” experimental and accidental (DN 201-203), and finally, capable of living his life not according to the tragic model, but rather according to an ironic model accepting the impossibility of a full reconciliation in individual existence of the spheres of being and sense. In precisely this subject – based on the utopian, fully liberated person of the future and the figure of the artist capable of entirely free and original creation and self-creation – Vattimo finds the characteristics of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. The religious and ethical turn in Vattimo’s thought, the beginnings of which may be observed in the 1990s, clearly had an influence on this interpretation. In “Sagezza del superuomo” (“The Wisdom of the Superman”), nihilism is understood as the “multicultural tower of Babel in which we live” (DN 187), thus taking on yet another concrete historical shape, as a diagnosis of the condition of contemporary culture. The “Superman” (*Übermensch*) – or, as Vattimo prefers,

78 Here the difference between the interpretations of Vattimo and Heidegger is most apparent. According to Vattimo, Heidegger places too much emphasis on the metaphysical aspects of Nietzschean nihilism and the will to power.

79 Vattimo, Gianni, *Koniec nowoczesności*, trans. M. Surma-Gawłowska (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), p. 156.

the “Overman” (*oltreuomo*) – undergoes a similar reinterpretation; it is no longer the subject of critical or unmasking thought, which rebels against contemporary mass culture and the decline of traditional values that accompanies it, but rather a hermeneutical-genealogical subject experiencing this decline as an event in being and capable – to use one of Vattimo’s favorite concepts – of “getting over” it. The plural subject, withdrawing from a strong identity in favor of categories of love, or friendship (*caritas*), hospitality, and openness to the other both within and beyond itself, is open to a multiplicity of interpretations. The figure of the *Übermensch*, in this “weakening” interpretation, is a democratic *Übermensch*, an “overman of the masses” (“*oltreuomo di massa*” – DN 192).

We must leave open the question of whether this reading is a gesture of interpretive violence or interpretive productiveness, a “renewal” of meanings, placing them in new contexts, and demonstrating that there is not “one” meaning of Nietzsche’s work, but that the meanings multiply in successive, “historical” readings.

The final “mask” that Vattimo puts on Nietzsche is the mask of a hermeneutical philosopher, a precursor (together with Heidegger) of contemporary hermeneutical ontology broadly understood. He juxtaposes the “hermeneutical Nietzsche” with the two dominant ways of interpreting Nietzsche’s philosophy: first, an interpretation which he defines as vitalistic or energetic, and which is represented according to him mainly by French authors, such as Bataille, Deleuze and Klossowski (it is characteristic that, in this context, Vattimo does not mention Derrida, whose reading of Nietzsche does not fit into the proposed distinction); and second, Heidegger’s interpretation, which he defines as “technological.” Both these readings, in Vattimo’s opinion, are burdened by metaphysics. The first one treats eternal return as a description of the “real” structure of reality, and not merely as one of many readings with a full consciousness of its interpretive character. The second one overemphasizes the subjective nature of the will to power as the striving of the “strong” subject to dominate the world.

The ruptures, or contradictions, which Vattimo finds in the hermeneutics of Nietzsche are, it would seem, analogical to those which might be noted in his own conception of hermeneutics. Vattimo presents a closer analysis of them in “Nietzsche and Contemporary Hermeneutics”⁸⁰ and in an essay devoted to *The Gay Science* (DN 220-223). Regardless of their concrete manifestations, they may be reduced to the opposition between hermeneutics treated as the search for

80 Published in English in Vattimo, Gianni, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

truth, the discovery of the given, hidden, profound sense of being or culture, and hermeneutics treated as deconstruction of the very idea of truth, sense, foundation. The first has a methodological character, closer to the philosophy of suspicion, unmasking, and the critique of culture. The second is closer to genealogical thought with an ontological character, showing that being itself is not a “strong” foundation, essence, or structure, but rather has a hermeneutic or interpretive character.

Nietzsche’s writings and their interpretation have clearly been the most important “laboratory” in which weak thought has emerged. On the other hand, the assumptions of the latter have influenced the way in which Vattimo has read Nietzsche. The reception of Nietzsche’s thought by Vattimo and the evolution of that reception also demonstrate that it is difficult to reconcile a Nietzsche read through Marx with a Nietzsche read through Heidegger, just as it is difficult to reconcile the two fundamental inspirations for weak thought – dialectics and the philosophy of difference.⁸¹ While the first aspires at any cost to abolish the difference between being and beings, event and meaning, being and value or sense, and considers this abolition to be possible, the second – weak ontology, treated consistently – implies a trace-remnant conception of being and the experience of being, from which it emerges that the differences mentioned are originary and indelible. Something always remains – trace, difference, remnant – which cannot be absorbed by the dialectical scheme.

Weak Thought and Post-Structuralism

For Vattimo, deconstruction – and particularly the thought of Jacques Derrida – also provided an essential partner in philosophical dialogue. Therefore, it is worth sketching out the main threads of this argument (I also mention certain of its specific aspects elsewhere), which particularly concerns the various ways of understanding the idea of difference, as well as the interpretation of the legacy of the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger in contemporary thought. The argument between Vattimo and Derrida is an argument about who is the best or most faithful reader of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Vattimo seems to treat Derrida as Derrida treated Heidegger, or as Heidegger treated Nietzsche – in other words, as the last metaphysician, as a thinker truly striving to go beyond metaphysics, yet still entangled in it.

Vattimo devoted three essays from *Le avventure della differenza* to discussing the idea of difference in Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s work in the spirit of more or less open polemic with Derrida: “Nietzsche e la differenza,” the

81 Vattimo mentions them in “Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought.”

title essay “Le avventure della differenza,” and “Dialettica e differenza.” In the most general terms, he accuses Derrida specifically – and the French post-structuralists more generally – of over-substantializing difference, as a result of which it turns into a new version of the metaphysical foundation or the source of history: “The *archi*-structure of difference occupies the place of meaning, the Platonic idea, the *ontos on* of all metaphysics.”⁸² A radical understanding of difference as such should not be based on recalling it, finding it and bringing it out of forgetting, or on making it present or “representing” it, but rather on remembering it (the Heideggerian *Andenken*) in its nature as event, and not as basis or essence. Since metaphysics represents the very history of being, and not some theory or concept deforming its original experience, the forgetting about difference is also the forgetting of difference. This play on the double meaning of the subjective and objective genitive emphasizes that his falling into oblivion is not a “fall” or betrayal – something affecting it from without, an error that may be diagnosed and corrected – but rather something constitutive of difference and forming a part of its way of occurring.

Vattimo further develops these fundamental charges aimed in “Nietzsche e la differenza” at Derrida – the departure from the radicalism of the Heideggerian interpretation of difference, the weakening of its incidental and historical nature, its absolutization and the conferral of a metaphysical basis – in his treatise on the vicissitudes of difference. Derrida’s philosophy also fails to provide a satisfying interpretation of difference, since it submits the idea of the simulacrum – of an image that does not refer to any original model (just as the Derridean trace does not refer to any source) – to what is, in Vattimo’s view, an unjustifiable universalization: “if one affirms difference as the universality of the simulacrum, a doubling without a model, then all differentiation between simulacra, all hierarchy of traces becomes arbitrary and, insofar as it is not recognized as such, reproduces the metaphysical mythologies.”⁸³ Difference understood in this way becomes at best an “energetic idea,” revealing the tensions in the constant flow of life, and ultimately reduces itself to a slightly altered version of Bergsonian vitalism. Thus the logic of the arguments that Vattimo advances against post-structuralist interpretations of the idea of difference is consistent: in attempting to overturn metaphysics, they merely shift

82 Vattimo, *Le avventure della differenza*, p. 83. Vattimo is referring here to Derrida’s claim in “Force and Signification” from *Writing and Difference*: “It [difference] too, in an unexpected sense, is an originary structure: the opening of history, historicity itself” [Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 34].

83 Vattimo, *Le avventure della differenza*, p. 159.

it or even consolidate it, since they do not remove the basis or foundation, but merely replace it with another, superficially unmetaphysical principle.

The interpretation of difference proposed by Vattimo is different and clearly follows in the footsteps of Heidegger, including the early Heidegger from the period of *Being and Time*. In thinking about difference – and the thinking of difference – what matters, according to Vattimo, is not the replacing of the idea of being or presence with absence, or with a chain of simulacra, copies without an original model, multiplying in the movement of differing repetition. Instead, what counts is extracting the full potential of difference as event, which is only possible on the foundation of hermeneutics. Vattimo identifies the ontological difference between being and beings with the difference between a defined horizon of understanding, which is always historical, finite and concrete, and that which may appear within that horizon and thus be thought: “Difference, precisely because it is thought as ontological difference, or as difference between *Lichtung*, or horizon, and being, or what is present, does not bring about the simple repetition of equivalent structures, but rather develops as an always historically defined divergence between the de-termining horizon, *bestimmend*, a certain historical era, and what appears within it as present.”⁸⁴ Therefore, difference is neither full presence, nor absence or appearance, but rather that which occurs historically and submits to interpretation, or becomes the subject of remembrance or contemplation (*Andenken*, about which there will be a broader discussion in the following chapter): “From this point of view, the ontological difference is coincident with the very finitude and historical thrownness of existence. The meaning hermeneutics already has in *Being and Time*, which grows in Heidegger’s subsequent works, clearly indicates the direction in which he is developing his conception of a thinking that would ‘remember’ being and difference. If being ‘gives’ itself and happens, as the setting of historical horizons in which existence can come across beings and in this way develop as temporality, then thinking that remembers being means, above all, the situating of that which is present within the horizons defining it. This situating (*Er-örterung*) is a kind of remembering thought, which may replace metaphysics and its claims to the final definition of the structures of being. The hermeneutical *Er-örterung* is thinking that is a re-sponse to being as *event*.”⁸⁵ We might add that this event has a meaning that can never be fully exhausted, defined, appropriated or made “present.”

The divergence between the horizon and what is within it and made present through it, finitude, thrownness, temporality as the inevitability of transience

84 Ibid., p. 166.

85 Ibid., p. 164.

that marks existence with difference: these are the key terms for Vattimo's interpretation of difference, which ultimately takes on a meaning similar to the Heideggerian idea of *Abgrund*, or "unfoundedness" (*sfondamento*, as Vattimo expresses it). Difference interpreted in this manner is the point of departure for Vattimo's radical hermeneutics, emphasizing not only the constructive aspects of understanding and the opening and broadening of its horizons, but also incomprehension, the impossibility of the complete fusion of horizons (for instance, of the work and the interpreter), and the full integration, closure and assimilation of sense (the work, tradition, the historical past) in the act of interpretation – and not as error or imperfection, but as an irremovable component of every understanding.

Vattimo distinguishes two specific areas of contemporary civilization in which the philosophical idea of difference takes on particular meaning. The first area is social communication and its theory. Here difference manifests itself in "a game of integration and lack of foundation", and means the impossibility of creating a fully transparent social discourse. The second area is the conception of the relation between culture and nature. Nature, as that which is different from culture, constitutes for culture a dimension that Vattimo defines through an almost untranslatable play on words: *fondo* (meaning, among other things, bottom, remnant, depth, end) – *sfondo* (background, environment) – *sfondamento* (literally, battering down, breaking down). This means that relations between what is natural and what is cultural do not have an organic character (meaning that culture grows out of nature), but neither does nature have an exclusively cultural (semiotized) character. Nature and its "immensity" – as biologism, animality and silence – reminds us of the finitude and limitation of man and his creations, showing their fragility, mortality, temporality, inevitably dissipating the meanings of human experience, and making their full retrieval in the act of historical understanding impossible. This theme will turn out to be particularly important to Vattimo's aesthetic ideas, especially in regard to artistic form and poetic language.

Above all, it seems that such a strong emphasis on the theme of difference is meant to defend hermeneutical philosophy against the return to metaphysical or dialectical thought that, in a certain variant, threatens it. For if temporality is understood as an accumulation of meanings, the human being as a "strong" subject identical with himself and capable of integrating the meanings of his experience, language as a transparent means of accessing and communicating meanings, culture as the single and lasting foundation of existence, and art as a unity of form and content (of the process of meaning and what is meant, the sensory and the ideal), then understanding and interpretation must inevitably mean the assimilation of sense – in other words, some version of dialectical

appropriation or of metaphysical representation. Therefore, in spite of his ostentatious distancing from Derrida's thought and certain specific divergences in the interpretation of the idea of difference, Vattimo's radical hermeneutics is perhaps closer to deconstruction than to the "classical" concepts of interpretation of Gadamer or Ricoeur.

A great many interesting similarities also appear between Vattimo's thought and the late Derrida (for instance, after the ethical turn).⁸⁶ Most importantly, these include: an interest in religion,⁸⁷ the motif of the trace,⁸⁸ the gift ("the event of being is a gift, a prodigality, and, finally, a call to nothingness, dispersal, or, we might say – and as it may well be understood – to weakening," writes Vattimo, comparing the idea of the gift in the writings of Heidegger and Bataille),⁸⁹ tradition (history as a collection of messages conveyed from the past), hospitality (the weak subject that is "the center of hospitality, overhearing diverse voices, a mobile spectrum of symbols and references, which is closer to the ideal the less it allows itself to be closed into form once and for all"),⁹⁰ and friendship.

86 Burzyńska, Anna, *Anty-teoria literatury* (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), pp. 456-459.

87 It would be interesting to compare the interpretation of Christian tradition in Derrida's late texts (for instance, in *Donner la mort*) and in Vattimo (*Credere di credere* and *Dopo la cristianità*).

88 It is characteristic that Vattimo adopts the idea of the trace for his conception of weak thought, in spite of the initially critical position towards Derrida's and Lacan's conceptions of the trace expressed in *Le avventure della differenza* (p. 153) and *Al di là di soggetto* (p. 80). At this stage of the development of his concept, Vattimo maintains that the trace expresses a yearning for presence.

89 Vattimo, "Nietzsche 1994," in *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, p. 295.

90 Vattimo, "La sagesza del superuomo," in *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, p. 194.

A Lexicon of Weak Thought: *Verwindung*, *Andenken*, *pietas*

“Above all: *pietas*” (Noica)⁹¹

Weak thought is characterized not so much by the attempt to create new – or better – languages, projects or visions, which might replace the old, worn-out and outdated languages, projects and visions, nor even by a nostalgia for the new, but rather by a specific relation to what is found or encountered, based on the inevitable entanglement in what weak thought leaves behind and on an acceptance of this condition. Vattimo defined the relation of weak thought both to the great philosophical tradition and to cultural tradition in general with a term drawn from Heidegger, *Verwindung*, which he juxtaposes with the idea of *Überwindung*, meaning dialectical surpassing, going beyond, or abolition. In the lexicon of Heideggerian philosophy, *Verwindung* – the getting over, recovering, returning to health, farewell, leaving behind, going beyond, which nevertheless contains within itself qualities of reception, accommodation and deepening⁹² – is a category describing the treatment of the metaphysical heritage. On the one hand, it describes this heritage as what is foreign to us, what remains beyond us, though precisely as something we inherit, or receive from the past. On the other hand, it describes it as something close, something in which we are still stuck, whether we like it or not, something to which we belong, if for no other reason than that we have nothing else at our disposal. In short: we are no longer modern, but we are still somehow stuck in modernity. We understand the limitations of metaphysical language, yet we are aware that we have no other language. We can only submit this language to deconstruction, transferral and deformation, while being aware that it no longer gives us full, direct access to being, essence, or our very selves.

Therefore, thinking in the categories of *Verwindung* remains in an ambiguous relation with the past and with philosophical and cultural tradition – a relation of belonging and not belonging, continuity and rupture, and, as Vattimo himself says, acceptance and deformation. It assumes a specific relation to what is found or encountered, based on an inevitable entanglement in what is left behind and on an acceptance of this condition. This game of belonging and not belonging, identity and difference, which is typical of *Verwindung*, is clearly

91 [înainte de toate: pietate] Cf. Noica, Constantin, *Jurnal de idei* (București: Humanitas, 2008), p. 215.

92 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 161.

visible in the ambiguous status of the modern work of art, which, as Vattimo writes, depends on the constant, self-ironical questioning of its own rules and the problematizing of its own status, as well as on citation, parody, pastiche and the transfer of tradition.

In *Etica dell'interpretazione*, Vattimo explains the term *Verwindung* as recovery, convalescence, acceptance, resignation, but also as deformation. Here the *Überwindung-Verwindung* opposition takes on a more concrete shape, and serves to describe the relation of postmodernity to modernity in the context of the dispute between Lyotard and Habermas on the subject of historicity and postmodernism as the end of history: "We can say that the postmodern is that with which the modern enters into relations of the *Verwindung* type: it accepts it and takes it on, preserves its traces within itself (like the traces of an illness from which we are still returning to health), and continues it, while at the same time deforming it."⁹³ Here weak thought appears as a kind of *via media* that softens the "strong" opposition between the discourses of modernity and postmodernity, since it assumes that, although a return to metaphysics and emancipatory discourse (Habermas) is impossible, the grand narratives of modernism are by no means outdated or rejected. Instead, they preserve their relevance as "memorials," peculiar monuments of thought, relicts from the past still allowing themselves to be taken up and interpreted anew.

In the *The End of Modernity*, the idea of *Verwindung* also appears in the context of reflections on modernity and postmodernity.⁹⁴ Here Vattimo seeks a genealogy of thinking in the categories of *Verwindung* in the Nietzschean philosophy of the morning, in the rhetoric of the return to health, and especially in the idea of the "chemical" analysis of values, "of moral, religious and aesthetic feelings and ideas,"⁹⁵ which he also refers to as the philosophy of error, understood as free wandering, or erring, a migration deprived of any final goal or destination and constituting a value in itself. The intellectual content of these motifs in Nietzsche's philosophy includes the conviction that the disintegration of the metaphysical foundation – of the truth as the basis on which the whole construction of reality stands – has also undermined the very possibility of the act of critical overcoming or abolition (for instance, the disproving or overturning of a view or vision of the world). It has done so both in the name of a truer, more adequate vision, and in the name of new (which in the modern reading means "better") values, which would replace the old and worn-out values on the road of human

93 Vattimo, Gianni, *Etica dell'interpretazione*, (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1989), p. 19.

94 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, pp. 154-159.

95 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Ludzkie arcyłudzkie (Menschliches, Allzumenschliches)*, trans. K. Drzewiecki (Warszawa, MCMVIII), p. 18.

progress. Both the concept of *Verwindung* and its Nietzschean precursors are closer to the postmodern idea of deconstruction (as a dismantlement “from within,” which in a certain way “distorts” its object by taking up marginal, ignored and suppressed motifs in the analyzed text or culture) than to the traditionally understood critique of ideology, based on the ideas of unmasking or suspicion, which is characteristic of modern thought. They grow out of the conviction that the content of being is not some mythical depth, juxtaposed with the surface and demanding interpretation as the bringing to light of that which is hidden, but rather – to refer to Nietzsche once again – “that which is in the foreground, surface, that which is close or closest, skin and appearance”⁹⁶ – in other words, metaphysics itself, understood not as a collection of truths, but rather as a collection of stories about being, traces and traditions conveyed from the past.

One of the most important and promising contexts in which Vattimo uses the concept of *Verwindung* as a fundamental characteristic of postmodern thinking involves the question of the world of science and technology, once again in the Heideggerian sense of the term *Ge-stell*: “We can say that the ‘object’ of *Verwindung* is above all *Ge-stell*, since it is precisely in this that metaphysics comes to fulfillment in its most developed form, as the total organization of the world by means of technology.”⁹⁷ As we know, in *Identity and Difference* Heidegger suggested, in an unambiguous manner and with the aid of a strongly idiomatic language, that technology is not just the work of man, but a special kind of summoning of being and a certain form of the most general relation into which being and man may enter. In *Gestell* and its domination we can already perceive the “first spark” of the event (*Ereignis*) that makes possible the rolling up (*Verwindung*) of the framework (*Gestell*) and announces a new, different, and “very preliminary” mode of man’s relation to being (defined as *belonging* together), in which both categories lose their metaphysical definitions, and which requires a departure from thought based on the representation of being by man.⁹⁸ In “The Principle of Identity,” Heidegger

96 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

97 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 168.

98 Cf. Heidegger, Martin, *Identity and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). In “The Principle of Identity” an example of this is given by modern nuclear physics, in which a change in the way of referring to objects is beginning to occur. This change, on the path beaten by modern technology, is completely transforming the mode of human representation. A similar question can be found in “The Turn,” where Heidegger speaks of a turn taking place in the framework away from the forgetting of being and its denial towards the guarding of the truth of being, as well as of the spark illuminating the truth of being and the danger, which is the framework, and which simultaneously represents hope.

expresses himself in a similar way, whereby he treats the correspondence of man and technology as an announcement of the most original possibilities of man's being. In this context, interpretation – to which Vattimo applies ambiguous terms drawn from Heidegger's philosophy, such as *Verwindung*, and whose key moment is the close association of the history of metaphysics with the development of modern scientific-technological civilization – moves clearly in a direction that the Italian philosopher himself defined in *Oltre l'interpetazione* as “leftist.” Here this “leftism” means opting not for Heidegger as a nostalgic thinker calling for a return to an authentic, original experience of being perverted by the scientific-technological organization of the world (as Noica often does, at least in his most clearly worded remarks and commentaries⁹⁹), but for Heidegger as a thinker announcing the fact of the inevitable departure, or “withdrawal”, of being as a fundamental event of the late-modern world.

Therefore, neither the forgetting of being nor science and technology are simply unfortunate cases, errors, perversions or breaches in the tradition of Western thought; rather, they are its logical successors and represent particular stages in its development. Thinking that refers to categories of *Verwindung* is the appropriate form philosophy should take at the end of modernity, understood both as its conclusion, or exhaustion, but also as its arrival at the border and as the full development of its entire project. This is the response that philosophy should give to this era's characteristic event in being. Such an attitude means that metaphysics is not accepted in the full and traditional form it assumed in the past, but it also means that metaphysics is not submitted to critique in the name of some better, more adequate or “original” access to being, truth, sense or the authenticity of experience. After all, such a critique would necessarily assume a separation of authentic, lasting and unchangeable being from the accidental and historical means of talking about it, as well as the possibility of “surpassing” metaphysics, or creating a better, more “real” representation of being than has been possible in the past, a deeper objectivization of it, a more adequate description of it, and of constructing a new theory, a new language capable of replacing worn-out concepts and ideas. Therefore, it would merely constitute the continuation of the metaphysical project and would mean further and deeper entanglement in metaphysics in an altered or slightly transferred form. The object of *Verwindung* is metaphysics itself as the proper history of being. In other words, it is not some “theory” or “representation” that can be submitted to

99 See: Noica, *Devenirea întru ființa*, pp. 223, 277. According to Noica, technology is the exemplary instance of an opening that closes (juxtaposed with an ontological closure that opens, expressed by the preposition “*întru*”) and of the domination of determinations devoid of any reference to general meanings.

critique from some meta-level, from a position of more perfect theories or representations, but the only place of its historical happening, occurrence, and its opening of itself to thought, beyond which we simply have no access to this being at all.

This “ambiguity” characterizing the relation of thought in the category of *Verwindung* to the metaphysical heritage is also visible in civilizational and cultural reflections. “Getting over” the phenomenon of total organization of the world by means of modern science and technology does not mean an attempt at surpassing it, or even a critique in the name of traditional humanist ideals that this total organization has supposedly betrayed. Referring to the idea of *Verwindung* allows for the perception of a close link between the metaphysical forgetting of being and the technological exploitation of the world. It also allows the world of science and technology, along with the civilizational and social phenomena associated with it – such as alienation, leveling, and dehumanization – to be treated not as the opposition, but rather as the logical succession to modern humanism (in the Heideggerian sense, of course) – in other words, the fact of the transformation of philosophy into anthropology, of man into subject and the world into object. Thinking based on the idea of *Verwindung*, insofar as it concerns the question of metaphysics, is far removed both from inscribing itself into the metaphysical perspective and from praising ways of accessing being rooted in the extra-rational, the mystical or the spirit of negative theology. To the extent that it concerns reflections on modern culture, it is also far removed both from the glorification of the “heroic” version of civilizational progress and from the critique of ideology or culture in the spirit of the Frankfurt School. Much like the end of metaphysics, the technological organization of the world is thus not a fact that must be submitted to critique and captured in some adequate description, but rather – as it is expressed in the tradition reconstructed here – an event to which thought ought to respond. As it appears, this response may – and ought to – take on precisely the form of *Verwindung*; in other words, not an abolition or surpassing, but an acceptance and “getting over,” which allows one to perceive in the world dominated by science and technology not a threat to the essence of the human being, but a chance for the coming into existence of new, un-(post-, ultra-)metaphysical relations of being and the human being. Vattimo sees their essence in the “unburdening” (which might be regarded as a slightly different version of the basic of metaphor of weakness) or “dissolving” of reality, its loss of a “hard” character defined and determined once and for all. This “dissolution” expresses itself in the erasure of the difference between truth and fiction, between “objective” facts and their representations, between things and images, which is characteristic of modern

information civilization.¹⁰⁰ It is not difficult here to notice that this “unburdening” is precisely the “getting over,” proposed by the logic of the *Verwindung* – in the sense of conscious undertaking, unwinding and, at the same time, bringing to an end – of that which Heidegger sometimes called a world picture, or the reduction of being to representation that constitutes the essence of nihilism in the German philosopher’s understanding.

Therefore, thought that refers to the idea of *Verwindung* stands as a certain kind of counter-proposal to the traditional rhetoric of the crisis of humanism and humanistic values in the contemporary world. For by revealing the indissoluble link between metaphysics, science, technology and humanism, it shows that the source of dehumanization is the modern subject itself, and not any threats external to it, while the crisis of subjectivity is the logical outcome of the fulfillment and full development of metaphysics in the *Ge-stell*.¹⁰¹ The remedy to this situation, however, is not the restitution of the subject, the restoration of its threatened or lost position, or the aspiration “to build a more complete *humanitas*.”¹⁰² In the Heideggerian-Nietzschean tradition that informs Vattimo’s reflections – and into which they are inscribed – paths towards an exit from the crisis of humanism should not be sought in a “strengthening” or “deepening” of traditional subjectivity as basis, or *subiectum*. Nor should they be sought in the liberation of the subject from various oppressions or in the subject’s reappropriation of its alienated essence. Instead, they should be sought in “getting over” this crisis, which also means accepting it, understanding it, and perceiving in it opportunities and remedies for the problems concerning the modern human being. Against the background of various contemporary anti-humanist discourses, Vattimo’s proposal seems interesting and resonant as a diagnosis of, and tool for analysing, the basic problems of modern subjectivity, since it shows the potentially humanist character of “anti-humanist” thought. It treats nihilism (defined as a phenomenon of weakening, “dissolution,” abandoning of all metaphysical foundations) not as a threat, but as a liberation – or rather the beginning of the road to liberation – of man’s being from the metaphysically understood subjectivity responsible for the crisis of humanity. It avoids a language that refers to the idea of the subject’s emancipation, demonstrating this language to be a legacy of dialectical, modern and metaphysical thought. It manages simultaneously to protect modern subjectivity from certain simplifications that have not been avoided by the French

100 Here Vattimo probably comes closest to Noica, who – admittedly without referring to the technological context – still proposes a kind of thinking about being that would remove its traditional weightiness, seriousness and severity.

101 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 41.

102 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

philosophy positing the death of the subject, since it indicates that “subjectivity is not something we simply leave behind, like worn-out clothes.”¹⁰³ Therefore, it is not a figure that can be easily removed from thought on culture so that the idea of the anonymous text or discourse can be put in its place. “Weak thought” – as long as it is not interpreted in too simplistic a manner – seems to provide a richer and more subtle language in which we may speak about the decline of the subject, while making possible at the same time the development of new, non-humanist interpretations of the human being and his or her condition. I see two such possibilities: the presentation of the human being in relation to what is “beyond the human”¹⁰⁴ and – of particular importance here – the treatment of the subject as a trace.

Therefore, *Verwindung* is neither a fundamental critique, referring to the language of authenticity or a return to an essence of humanity that has yielded to extirpation and decline, nor a form of dialectics calling for a surpassing of a degenerated condition in the name of an abolition of alienation to be accomplished in the future. The closest context for this idea seems to be deconstruction, as a dismantlement performed from within using the tools of the very system against which it is directed.

Towards the end of the essay under discussion here – “Nihilism and Postmodernism in Philosophy” – an interesting suggestion appears, though Vattimo does not develop it, which points to the possibility and necessity of closely connecting hermeneutics with a *Verwindung*-based reflection on the subject of a world dominated by science and technology.¹⁰⁵ This appears to lead in the direction of a variant of hermeneutics that we might provisionally call the “non-humanist” conception of understanding, since its fundamental characteristic is the fact that the comprehensive crisis of humanism in the twentieth century constitutes its basis and positive point of departure. It is not easy to provide an unambiguous and exhaustive answer to the question of precisely how this non-humanist conception of understanding might present itself. In my view, certain possibilities for thinking about it may be found in Vattimo’s reflections on nihilism and conceptions of art and poetic language. However, one question appears to be indisputable: on the basis of this conception it is no longer possible to maintain modern hermeneutical discourse’s fundamental division into explanation and understanding, *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaften*, nomothetism and idiographism,

103 *Ibid.*, p. 41

104 See Vattimo’s “Sagezza dell’ superuomo” from *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, where the Italian philosopher proposes to translate the term *Übermensch* as “Over-man” (*oltre-uomo*).

105 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 169.

in which the humanities have been defined as a realm of reflection and knowledge protecting the freedom of the human soul and the traditionally understood humanist values from the dehumanizing activity of science and technology. Consequently, hermeneutics can no longer be understood in the two functions traditionally ascribed to it: as the basis or grounding of the humanities and as their general methodology,¹⁰⁶ as a new *koine*, in the sense of a place of the reconciliation, dialogue and harmonizing of various discourses about man. Hermeneutics is not a grand narrative – thanks to which man can regain the meanings of his existence, make his history transparent and communicate with the past and tradition – but rather a discourse questioning the transparency and cumulative nature of meaning.

Verwindung in Vattimo's philosophy is an idea very close to the idea of *Andenken* – remembering, remembrance – which is also drawn from the writings of the late Heidegger. In *What Is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger characterizes memory as consciousness, attentiveness, concentration, staying with everything that is given to be thought, but also as an ability to “recall,” that is, to stop and restore that which is past and unending, as a remembrance of or concentration on that which is the most important, that which is in the most proper sense given to be thought, and as a preserving of this gift. However, this preserving also allows for forgetting, which is not defined by deficiency, lack of preservation, or anything negative, but instead constitutes an inevitable veiling and concealing. Therefore, memory in *What Is Called Thinking?* acquires meanings far removed from the colloquial and thus becomes a model for authentic, original thinking, which also constitutes a thanking (*Danken*) for the gift entrusted to man that is thinking itself.¹⁰⁷

According to Vattimo, *Andenken* has the same meaning for post-metaphysical thought as the idea of the foundation, or of founding, has for metaphysics. Remembrance, or *Andenken*, appears when there is a rejection of the proposal to do philosophy not merely as representation, but also as critical philosophy, an attempt at an adequate description of the actual cultural or political situation, or a diagnosis of the state of things, which is still strongly associated with the category of abolition, surpassing, replacing an outdated description in the name of a better description that is more adequate to, and congruent with, reality. *Andenken* is close to the Nietzschean “rest in peace” conviction that, since all values and systems of meaning are human creations, they remain close to us and dear as mementoes or traces from the past.

106 See: Januszkiewicz, *W-kolo hermeneutyki literackiej*.

107 See: Heidegger, Martin, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

Therefore, they need not be rejected as mistaken or unnecessary “relicts,” but we should look after them, remember them, preserve them, treat them with solicitude and care. *Andenken* is precisely *Verwindung* – an idea that rejects the claim of the metaphysical *archai* to absoluteness, while not referring to any other absolute value in their place and not apprehending reality in the categories of *Grund* (grounding). Instead, it merely makes the world more accessible through the establishment of continuity and unity, though in a “weak” sense understood on the basis of a family likeness.

Vattimo compares *Andenken* with the idea of *sagen* – story or narration. Philosophy in the form of remembrance is a story about a certain history that is created both by the adventures of philosophy itself and by external events, or historical determinations, transformations associated with the transition from modernity to postmodernity. Memory, remembering thought, is a secularized form of philosophy as metaphysics – that is, the striving towards grounding – which nevertheless provides a certain plane of understanding and mediation instead of a foundation. Firstly, it ensures continuity between the past and the present. Secondly, it facilitates understanding between the divided, atomized outcomes of particular sciences. It does not try to develop a “strong” unification, totalization or synthesis, but rather to build a practical space for mediation, understanding, persuasiveness, a rhetorically understood truth, narration – all based on the *koine*, a common language, which is spoken by a historical, concrete society and which is opposed to the abstract and formal language of science. Remembering thought, thanks to the turn towards the past and its forms, may also fulfill regulating and critical functions in reference to choices concerning the future, as well as directing these choices. Memory, or remembrance, is also a link with the past, a belonging, an adaption, an inscription into tradition. Hence Vattimo, referring to Gadamer and the Hegelian conception of objective spirit (institutions, forms of culture, etc.), speaks about the “classical” conception of truth as a belonging to a defined cultural horizon, about truth as a domain not of individual experience (Descartes), but of collective experience.¹⁰⁸

Accepting the conception of thought as *Andenken* is a consequence of “the abandoning of being as ground”¹⁰⁹ in favor of a leap into being as groundlessness.¹¹⁰ However, this groundlessness is neither “an empty

108 On the subject of the idea of *Andenken*, see especially “*Andenken. Il pensare e il fondamento*” in *Le avventure della differenza, La fine della modernità, and Etica dell'interpretazione*.

109 Heidegger, Martin, *Ku rzeczy myślenia*, trans. K. Michalski, J. Mizera, C. Wodziński (Warszawa: Aletheia, 1999), p. 11.

110 See: Heidegger, Martin, *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Indiana University Press, 1991).

nothingness, nor a dark chaos,”¹¹¹ nor a “complete void.”¹¹² Thus it cannot be comprehended in the terms of nihilism as commonly understood, nor in the terms of anti-fundamentalism. It is, however, an attempt at reaching a truth of being that does not have the character of any “deeper” or better basis, or surer ground, but rather of a play of hiddenness and unhiddenness, sending and escaping.¹¹³ In other words, thinking as remembrance is, as Vattimo adds, a consequence of a radical treatment of the ontic-ontological difference between Being and beings: “if we don’t wish to expose ourselves to the risk of remaining within a metaphysics identifying Being with beings, Being must be thought only in categories of remembrance. Being is that which always has already passed, and thus, in essence, is not (any longer with us).”¹¹⁴

Vattimo develops the theme of thinking as remembrance – *Denken* as *Andenken* – most extensively, and in the most interesting manner, in his earliest text devoted to this idea: “Andenken. Il pensare e il fondamento” from *Le avventure della differenza*. These reflections are an essential contribution to modern reflections on the phenomenon of remembering in history and culture, in which the most crucial characteristic seems to be a strong emphasis on the link between *Mnemosyne* and *Lethe*, memory and its negation, forgetting.¹¹⁵ The fundamental concepts by which Vattimo considers *Andenken* include the following: representation, tradition and message, difference, alienation and its abolition, interpretation and hermeneutical thought.

Vattimo argues thus: since Being is not a being, or something present (both in the spatial and temporal sense), thinking about it as remembrance must be clearly opposed to representation (in the Heideggerian sense) and re-representation (as the doubling of an original presence). *Andenken* is not limited to the ability to present what is momentarily absent since in this case it would remain the entire time within the horizon of instrumental, objectivizing thought, the objects of which are beings: “The *An-denken* that Heidegger draws our attention to cannot be understood as a remembering that ‘regains’ being as something we can encounter face to face. Remembering recalls being precisely as something that can only be recalled, and never re-presented.”¹¹⁶ Therefore,

111 See: Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*.

112 See: Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*.

113 Ibid.

114 Vattimo, Gianni, “Nietzsche i hermeneutyka współczesna,” trans. M. Surma-Gawlowska and A. Zawadzki, *Przestrzenie teorii* nr 7, p. 339.

115 See: Ricoeur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Weinrich, Harald, *Léthé. Art. Et critique de l’oubli*, traduit de l’allemand par D. Meur (Fayard, 1999).

116 Vattimo, *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, p. 271.

thinking as *An-denken* is a thinking of what thought does not fully have at its disposal and cannot fully possess. It leaves the past as that which is bygone and passed without attempting to regain it, re-appropriate it, or make it present through an attempt at liquidating temporal distance. On the other hand, it is remembrance, meditation on being itself, of which the constitutive characteristic is precisely the fact that it is that which is always past and given only in traditions, messages conveyed from the past, traces and remnants.

In another piece from *Le avventure della differenza* – entitled “Dialettica e differenza” – Vattimo juxtaposes Heideggerian *Andenken* with Hegelian *Erinnerung* (memory, remembering). The latter has a metaphysical character, since its essence is the internalizing or appropriation of what is external with respect to the subject in the process of reaching absolute self-knowledge through Spirit. Memory understood in this way is essentially an expression of the metaphysical forgetting of being, since it introduces the difference between Being and beings as a result of the fact that it aspires to a return to *Grund*, as well as to capture the basis of all beings, a basis that is itself treated as a being that may be represented and submitted to objectivization. In contrast, *Andenken* is an attempt to go beyond the chain of founding beings, which reaches as far as the highest being, and a leap into groundlessness, into the *infinitum*: “*Andenken* – and this is the basis of its difference from the simple ability to represent – is a thought of the leap into infinity.”¹¹⁷

Clearly, Vattimo juxtaposes Heidegger – read in this anti-dialectical manner – with all those varieties of thought that assume the possibility of abolishing the alienation of the subject, the return of the human being to his own proper essence, from which he has been alienated in the processes of history and civilization, the reconciliation of existence and its meaning. Examples of this kind of thinking would be provided not only by Hegelianism and Marxism, but by the entire rich tradition of thought that Vattimo defines as the classicist, post-Renaissance current aspiring to the ideal of humanity as a totality or fullness reconciled with itself, a current that expresses itself most fully in the Hegelian ideal of a classical art entirely reconciling content and form, the internal and the external. However, this ideal is based on a philosophy of presence, which in this case takes on the form of a fully self-transparent and self-conscious *humanitas*, a utopian society constituting the culmination of the historical process. In the meantime, thinking as *Andenken* – as thinking based on a conception of being as tradition conveyed from the past or as the ontic-ontological difference – undermines the possibility of totalization in all its variants and levels, both those concerning the ideal of the individual and those concerning the social or

117 Vattimo, *Le avventure della differenza*, p. 140.

civilizational ideal. Here we may most clearly perceive Vattimo's attempt to connect the two traditions from which weak thought emerges: the philosophy of difference and the "disintegratory" strands of the dialectical tradition, in particular the negative dialectics of Adorno. *Andenken* – as the model for a thought that strives to go beyond the horizon of metaphysics and the philosophy of representation – is brought closer to a thought accenting the negative element as independent, and not submitting to appropriation, assimilation or absorption "in the perspective of the final redemption."¹¹⁸

The interpretation to which Vattimo submits the Heideggerian idea of *An-denken* is distinguished by two basic characteristics. The first is an attempt to avoid the theological or religious connotations of the above-mentioned triad of thinking-memory-thanking (*Denken, Andenken, Danken*), as an authentic, original contact with being itself, with that which – in a universal and essential perspective – conditions the human being and to which he owes some form of "thanksgiving." In contrast, the proper object of *An-denken*, according to Vattimo, is the historical, concrete moment in which we are living – that which we have to think about today, and therefore, the task, or "message of being" (to use Heidegger's language), the summons or challenge to which we must respond. In other words, it is mainly the world of fulfilled modernity and metaphysics, *Ge-stell*, with which remembrance enters into similar relations as "getting over." As Vattimo puts it in "Dialettica e differenza": "not 'beyond' Gestell towards *Andenken*, but towards *Andenken* in or through Gestell."¹¹⁹

The second distinguishing characteristic of Vattimo's interpretation is the attempt to "link," in the context of the question of memory under discussion here, the late Heidegger with the early Heidegger from the period of *Being and Time*, which results in a fundamental emphasis on the continuity of his thought. On the one hand, there is thinking in the categories of the ontic-ontological difference and the leap into groundlessness; on the other hand, there is the indeterminate nature of existence open to various possibilities of being, as well as the finitude of this existence and "being towards death" as its fundamental characteristic. The common quality linking these two "lexicons" is the intention to remove from existence and being in general the character of metaphysical necessity, definiteness, the gravity reserved for the objective sphere, and to show it in its potentiality, in its open character, in its historicity and accident.

From here it is only a short step to identifying *Andenken* with hermeneutics, specifically with those radical varieties of hermeneutics that highlight the open

118 Vattimo, *Le avventure della differenza*, p. 144.

119 *Ibid.*, p. 174. The essay mentioned is the broadest representation and interpretation of the Heideggerian idea of *Gestell* in all of Vattimo's writings.

and infinite character of the process of interpretation without ever leading to the constitution of a final sense of being, existence or the text. Vattimo defines this aspect of hermeneutics with the term *sfondante*,¹²⁰ which in his later conceptions becomes the point of departure for the building of a nihilistic hermeneutics. This term emphasizes the “inexhaustibility” of truth and being, which are submitted to infinite interpretation, allowing us in turn to distinguish Vattimo’s notion of hermeneutics from other more “constructive” varieties that emphasize the necessity of a strong rootedness within historical and cultural horizons as a condition of understanding. These other varieties are always at risk of a return to thinking in categories of basis and foundation constituting a guarantee of the stability and “presence” of meaning. Therefore, according to Vattimo, modern art and literature, which clearly confirm his reflections on aesthetics and poetic language, also constitute a model for a thinking based on *Andenken* and for infinite analysis.

Transferring Vattimo’s reflections to a realm closer to literary studies, we might add: modern literature – if we view it from the perspective of such categories as *Verwindung* and *Andenken* – is not memory (as adequate representation, reproduction, restoration, and so on), but rather the remembrance of being as a presence that has passed, after which only traces and remnants remain. In this understanding, it is close to the fundamental practices of twentieth-century literature, such as the diverse adaptation or transfer of traditions, repetition, parody and pastiche. The role filled in the conception of weak thought by artistic, literary and cultural experience is clearly illustrated by the fact that Vattimo refers precisely to these practices – as well as to the figure of the modernist *flâneur* and to the space of the great cities, though seen and experienced rather from the point of view of their peripheries and not their centers – in order to illustrate the relation into which “getting over” and “remembrance” enter with metaphysics, with the world submitted to the domination of science and technology, and with modernity. These practices also root Heideggerian concepts in the ground of contemporary culture, and turn them into a useful language with which to describe that culture. In this way, both *Andenken* and *Verwindung* “settle in” or “instill” themselves in the domain of technology, though in its “cracks,” in the “gaps” in the *ratio* – in other words, in the weak or loosened places, which then can be utilized to “roll them up,” or even – if we might permit ourselves such a visual or image-based metaphor – to “turn” them up or inside out (as one does with a sleeve or an article of clothing).

120 Literally, this means “breaking down” or “undermining. It is the opposite of the idea of *fondante* – that which builds, grounds, founds, gives support or a basis – while it is close to such ideas as “*dislocazione*,” dislocation, or “*spaesamento*,” disorientation.

Finally, we have *pietas*, the third term that Vattimo uses, though he uses it much less often than “getting over” or “remembrance” in his descriptions of weak thought. This term distinguishes itself by being significantly less ambiguous than *Andenken* or *Verwindung* and by having less critical potential, while it also has clear religious connotations. In this way, it would appear to herald the later religious turn in Vattimo’s thought. *Pietas* in Latin means, among other things, love in accordance with duty, piety, attachment, friendship, family feelings, fidelity, and patriotism. Thanks to various associations from the well-known iconographical motif, it also refers to remembering and mourning: “it evokes above all mortality, finitude and deficiency.”¹²¹ Much like “getting over” and “remembrance,” *pietas* also may arise thanks to the collapse of metaphysics, when various ideas and concepts from the past are no longer treated as false, mistaken or overcome. It represents a love for everything that lives, and for the traces left over and inherited from the past.

“In order for philosophy to fully take on the form of remembrance, being should abandon its form of restricting presence and become memory, a basis without a basis.”¹²² Therefore, thought in the categories of *Verwindung*, *Andenken* or *pietas* emerges out of the assumptions of an anti-fundamentalist philosophy, from a “weak” ontology assuming that being does not have a permanent form or a stable essence. Being also does not manifest itself as a present “object” accessible to thought. Vattimo defines such an ontology – once again clearly referring to Nietzsche and Heidegger – as nihilistic.

121 See: Vattimo, “Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought.

122 Vattimo, *Etica dell’interpretazione*, p. 44.

Nihilism and Hermeneutics¹²³

According to Nietzsche – and this idea is repeated after him by Heidegger and Vattimo – nihilism is not a random or negative phenomenon, a subversive ideology, or an attack from outside against the fundamental values of the Western world. On the contrary, it is the necessary and internal process of development of these very values, since “nihilism represents the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values and ideals,”¹²⁴ as well as the opportunity for a new determination of values. The narrator from the “Preface” to *The Will to Power* – who calls himself a hermit, a bold spirit, a soothsayer bird and a tempter – predicts the coming of this process, which is to form “the history of the next two centuries,” and vaguely announces its overcoming, since he himself is the one who has experienced nihilism first and subsequently gone beyond it.

As is well known, Nietzsche distinguishes two kinds of nihilism in *The Will to Power*: a passive, weary nihilism and an active, subversive nihilism. The first is characteristic of the modern state of the European spirit, which is constituted by a belief in the absolute senselessness of existence, in the decline of previous values and in the lowering of the human being’s essential dignity. Nietzsche sees the cause of nihilism in the decline of a certain interpretation of the world: a certain comprehensive, elementary way of understanding and explaining reality,

123 The question of nihilism and its associations with modern thought has been approached from various points of view. The Heideggerian interpretation of nihilism in Nietzsche’s writings is discussed by Wojciech Morszczyński in his book *Nihilistyczna destrukcja myśli wartościującej* (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1992), which criticizes Heidegger’s theses that Nietzsche’s thought is not an overcoming but rather the culmination of modern metaphysics, as well as by Karl Löwith, in *Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), where the problem of nihilism is discussed in two articles in particular: “The Interpretation of the Unsaid in ‘Nietzsche’s Word “God is Dead””” and “European Nihilism,” which takes into account political and literary perspectives. Valeria Szydłowska refers to this interpretation in the context of Derridean thought in her book *Nihilizm i dekonstrukcja* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2003). Vittorio Possenti – in *Il nichilismo teoretico e la “morte della metafisica”* (Roma: Armando, 1995) – seeks the origins of modern nihilism in the departure from realist metaphysics and sees an opportunity for its overcoming in the restoration of the links between thought and being. From the perspective I have taken in this study, the texts assembled in the collection *Nihilizm-dzieje, recepcja, prognozy* (eds. S. Gromadzki and J. Necikowski, Warszawa: WFiS UW, 2001) are also important, since they reveal the links between nihilism and German idealism, and therefore join the Heideggerian conception of nihilism as the history of Western metaphysics. See also the popular anthology *Le nihilisme*, ed. Vladimir Biaggi (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1998).

124 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage, 1967), p. 4.

on which morality and the idea of the human being had previously been based, and which was regarded as the right and only way. This interpretation is based on three fundamental elements. Firstly, it depends on a faith in the meaning of the world, on the belief that existence, or the process of reality's becoming, must lead towards some goal, be it the realization of moral principles, salvation, or universal happiness. Secondly, it is based on a belief in the existence of a certain wholeness or organic unity of the world, which gives the individual a sense of participation in something higher than himself and therefore a feeling of greater value. Thirdly, it relies on the assumption that beyond the earthly world of the senses, which is regarded as illusory, there exists a real, indestructible and enduring world – for instance, the world of Platonic ideas. The decline in belief in these values, and in the mode of interpreting the world based on them, also undermines any faith in the value of the empirical world, of becoming and enduring. They are deprived of all meaning, since they were measured in categories referring to a world that, in the end, has turned out to be a delusion.

The grand narratives – to use Lyotard's phrase – of sense, wholeness and truth once assured the human being a basic orientation in the world. They allowed him to believe in his own values, the meaning of his life, the need to know things. Therefore, metaphysical categories stood as protective guards against nihilism, doubt and a belief in the vanity of human endeavors. However, as Nietzsche demonstrates, these guards are no longer required by modern Europeans, since their lives are to a much lesser extent marked by the uncertainty or fear characterizing human existence in traditional, pre-modern societies. This emancipation of the modern subject has allowed for the "loosening" of the traditional, rigorous bonds of morality, or – to use Vattimo's language, often referring precisely to this passage from Nietzsche's reflections¹²⁵ – for the "weakening" of "strong" metaphysical categories such as the idea of the subject, which had undergone a monstrous intensification for the purpose of defending the threatened position of the human being. This idea is now unmasked as a fiction, but also as the dangerous admission of a dose of randomness, or even senselessness, into existence.

Therefore, nihilism as a weakening of traditional values and metaphysical categories represents the immanent direction of the development of modernity and reveals its positive, emancipatory face. However, in this sense it already represents an active, subversive nihilism. Passive nihilism, paralyzed by the decline in the traditional, religious or metaphysical interpretation of the world, denies reality and existence any meaning whatsoever. Active nihilism – an expression of the growing freedom, potency and power of the spirit – does

125 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 20.

without such ideas as meaning or truth altogether. It deprives existence of transcendent meaning, truth and a real world. It perceives every interpretation of reality as falsehood or appearance, though both falsehood and appearance are necessary insofar as they suggest an awareness that they themselves constitute but one of many possible interpretations or narratives about the world, with no foundation in any unchanging order of reality.

According to Heidegger, Nietzsche's philosophy is the fulfillment both of nihilism itself and of the entire grand metaphysical tradition. Nihilism does not surpass this tradition, but rather brings it to its end, in the sense that it draws out its final conclusions. In fact, it remains within the horizon of metaphysical thinking, even as it wishes to overcome it, since – in the form of the metaphysics of the will to power – it assumes that being is that which truly exists and which takes the form of will, wanting and overcoming.¹²⁶ That which is most essential in the Heideggerian conception of nihilism is a double identification: of the history of being with metaphysics, and of metaphysics with nihilism. Nihilism is not only characterized by specific philosophical conceptions, such as the metaphysics of the will to power, but it is also essentially linked with metaphysics in general, from its beginnings in Plato right through to Nietzsche: "Metaphysics is as metaphysics the real nihilism."¹²⁷ This is the case because metaphysics thinks beings alone, representing things and objects, whereas it does not think being as such, which must necessarily remain beyond the horizon of metaphysics as that which is not thought, as nothing. Therefore, nihilism is the essence of the history of being, which is based on the fact that being is erased or obscured by concrete beings, that it falls into forgetting and cannot appear within the horizon of human knowing or experience: "Metaphysics is a history in which being itself by its very essence is left together with nothing."¹²⁸ Moreover, metaphysics is not even capable of experiencing this nihilism in its essence, of thinking the erasure of being in favor of beings – in other words, of seizing its own essence.¹²⁹

Therefore, much like in Nietzsche's writings, nihilism in Heidegger's thought is also treated as an historical event, a fundamental fact in European culture, though it is shifted from the axiological plane to the ontological plane,

126 Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche*, trans. into the Polish by various hands (Warszawa: PWN), Volume 2, p. 354.

127 *Ibid.*, p. 337.

128 *Ibid.*, p. 344.

129 Heidegger also writes about this double forgetting or blocking, of being and of the blocking itself, in "The Turning," where he gives his account of the world dominated by technology. Cf. Heidegger, Martin, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977).

and concerns not values and their weakening but being itself in its relation with beings. Two important consequences ensue from this fact. Firstly, nihilism here is far removed from its common definitions as a destructive theory or ideology that appeared at a concrete moment in history as a result of social transformations, or as the intentional and subversive activities, aspirations and predispositions of an individual or group. Nihilism is a point of view that the human being freely “imposes” on reality, and it concerns the very essence of the human being only indirectly, or only insofar as this essence participates in being and its transformations. Secondly, any intention to overcome nihilism is baseless, or premature at best, since the human being is not the “possessor” of being or history, and thus is not capable of subordinating them to his projects. Authentic thinking ought rather to trace this erasure or decline in being, learn how to reflect on being, try to understand its meaning and interpret its profound historical meaning.¹³⁰

Later on, Vattimo will strongly emphasize not only the philosophical and metaphysical aspects of nihilism, but also its civilizational contexts, treating it as a fundamental phenomenon in late-modern culture. He also strongly links nihilism with hermeneutics and recognizes in it a basis for the construction of a new ethics. In Vattimo’s understanding, nihilism is really another name for the phenomenon of the weakening of being, which is so fundamental for the author of *Fine della modernità*. Nihilism means “the presence of nothing” – that being “no longer is.”¹³¹ The history of being, metaphysics and modernity is precisely – as for Vattimo’s German masters – the history of nihilism as the weakening or “dissolution” of both the strong version of being and the strong metaphysical categories serving to describe it (especially the classical idea of truth as certainty and the correspondence of things and knowing). Nevertheless, Vattimo slightly alters the sense of Heideggerian nihilism as the forgetting or erasing of being in favor of beings. Instead, he endows it with distinctly emancipatory meanings that bring it closer to anti-fundamentalism and the desubstantialization of things themselves, with a liberation from the burden and gravity of being as presence in favor of its modality (as Noica would express it), from the rigidity of the imaginary in favor of the instability, uncertainty and exchangeability of the symbolic (here Vattimo refers to Lacan), and finally from that “which appears to be real, necessary, firm and true” in favor of the unlimited possibilities offered by the world of technology for the fictionalization of the world, for the

130 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 362.

131 Vattimo, *Oltre interpretazione. Il significato dell’ermeneutica per la filosofia*, p. 18.

“dissolution” of its “true version” (here Vattimo refers once again to Nietzsche) into stories and fairy tales.¹³²

This attitude toward technology – understood not critically, as an alienating and expropriating force, but positively, as an opportunity for reappropriation and a new interpretation of the essence of humanity and its attitude to the world (what Heidegger calls the new *Ereignis* of being) – provides a good illustration of the style in which Vattimo interprets Heidegger’s thought. In Vattimo’s understanding, the author of *Being and Time* is neither a critic of the world of scientific-technological civilization nor a thinker announcing a return to the truth of being or even a nostalgia for it (Vattimo calls these types of readings of Heidegger “rightist interpretations”); rather, he is a philosopher of “the long farewell, of the never-ending weakening of being”¹³³ – as the “leftist” interpretations of Heidegger’s thought declare. Vattimo places himself firmly on the side of these “leftist” readings.

Therefore, the response to the event of nihilism in the world of late modernity signifies both a separation from being and all its “strong versions,” and a farewell to the diverse philosophies that refer to authenticity, to the abolition of alienation, and to the restoration of the truth of human nature, philosophies such as existentialism and the various kinds of humanistic Marxism. In this way, it also marks a welcome to hermeneutics. The “nihilistic calling of hermeneutics”¹³⁴ depends on an awareness of the fact of unavoidable forgetting and of the departure from being, as well as on an understanding that, in the face of this situation, the only reality available to us is the reality of interpretation of the world. No essence, hidden meaning or true version of the world is concealed behind this interpretation.

Vattimo’s hermeneutical ethics is based on precisely this kind of nihilistic and anti-metaphysical ontology. The place of principles and imperatives founded on an unchanging human nature, or on the essence of reality, is occupied in his ethics by an interpretation of the traces of life, of the symbolic forms of historical configurations of experience, of messages reaching the modern human being from the past or from other cultures, as well as by an “ontology of actuality” as an attempt to understand his own time and to respond

132 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, pp. 23-25. Vattimo’s conceptions are close to the views of Jean Baudrillard, who, in differentiating the contemporary, postmodern form of nihilism from the murky, pathetic nihilism of the nineteenth century, defines it as a nihilism of transparency, the essence of which depends on the destruction of meaning, on its disappearance or implosion. Cf. Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S.F. Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 159-164.

133 Ibid.; See also: Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 22.

134 Ibid., p. 19.

to its challenges. According to Vattimo, nihilism is the central event and destiny of late modernity, defining its characteristic mode of experiencing being. The event-like nature of nihilism means two things. Firstly, this idea is far removed in Vattimo's thought not only from its common, banalized meanings, but also from any value judgment connotations associated with decline, degeneration or any other negative terms. On the contrary, nihilism – especially the fulfilled nihilism characteristic of late modernity – has a positive meaning, and represents the chance or possibility of an experience of being that would be different from the modern or, more broadly, metaphysical experience of being.¹³⁵

Secondly, nihilism – much like the other central ideas from *The End of Modernity*, such as the death of art or the concepts of *Verwindung* and *Andenken* discussed above – is not interpreted by Vattimo as a purely descriptive term whose task would be to provide a more or less adequate representation of the actual condition of society or culture. After all, such pretensions to being a critical description or diagnosis of some “objective” state of things would signify that nihilism was still being treated in metaphysical categories or from the dialectical perspective of *Überlieferung*. As an event, nihilism has something of destiny within itself, or perhaps of a condition of “accidence,” as that which falls to our times and thus constitutes the historical-cultural horizon in which we are located – and which we ought not so much to explain as to recognize in order to be able to answer it, or respond to it, appropriately.

The idea of nihilism in *The End of Modernity* has two basic functions, which might be defined respectively as ontological and cultural-anthropological. The former assumes that being itself – and not just the human being's means of experiencing it – is afflicted by weakness, “nihilation,” and fragility, that it “dissolves” and disintegrates. Being becomes, as Levinas says, “an-archic,” meaning that it loses any sense of the *arche*, principle, basis, foundation, etc. Being no longer manifests itself or “presents” itself as essence, substance, or full presence. Nihilism means “the presence of nothing” – that being “*no longer is.*”¹³⁶

Vattimo's ontological nihilism is clearly inspired by the Nietzschean and Heideggerian understanding of nihilism not as a destructive force threatening the order of European culture from without, but rather as a quality immanent to European culture, which manifests itself in the history of that culture and governs its development, as “the ultimate logical conclusion of our great values

135 Nihilism here may be understood as a liberation from the crushing burden of being in favor of a greater “lightness.” Therefore, in this context, it would be close to the conceptions of Noica, who treats the weakening of being as dispensing with its “hardness.”

136 Vattimo, *Oltre interpretazione. Il significato dell'ermeneutica per la filosofia*, p. 18.

and ideals.”¹³⁷ From Nietzsche, Vattimo takes on the notion of active nihilism, particularly emphasizing the emancipatory thread within it, according to which metaphysical categories such as the good, morality, truth, meaning, and the wholeness or unity of being were protective guards against the sense of the chaotic and random nature of existence and belief in the vanity of human endeavors.¹³⁸

From Heidegger, on the other hand, Vattimo draws the conception of metaphysics as a history manifesting the fulfillment of nihilism, as “a history in which being itself by its very essence is left together with nothing”¹³⁹ – in other words, as a history of the forgetting of Being and of its reduction to values and the complete dominance of the subject. However, in Vattimo’s interpretation, Heidegger is not a thinker who expresses nostalgia for some original, authentic or uncontaminated experience of Being, but rather a philosopher who calls for a farewell to Being, a leap into the *Abgrund*, and a departure from thinking based on the category of the foundation.

We might say that nihilism understood in this fashion is also an ontology or anthropology of the culture of late modernity. Indeed, this is precisely the second of the aspects in which it functions within Vattimo’s thought. Consistently meditated nihilism makes impossible the type of cultural critique characteristic of the Frankfurt School, for instance, or various other critiques of ideology, including Marxism. After all, these critiques of the society of total organization, alienation, reification, mass culture, mass media, “simulacrizaton,” etc. have been raised in the name of dealienation, liberation, the restoration of true human nature, and the belief that it would be possible to create a more authentic society and culture, in which the human being might more fully manifest and realize his or her true essence.

Nihilist ontology treats such an attitude as still entangled both in metaphysical thinking – which is based on the dichotomy between the real, hidden, profound essence and the unreal, superficial and visible appearance – and in modernity, with its most powerful instrument, dialectics, and the categories of abolition, progress and emancipation associated with it. However, for nihilist ontology, the alienating mechanisms of contemporary society and culture are an event – both a fulfillment of nihilism and simultaneously a chance for a new experience of being, which would be different from the modern or metaphysical experience of being, as something that must be taken up, thought through and “gotten over” (in the sense of *Verwindung*).

137 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 4.

138 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

139 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 344.

Vattimo develops the ontological understanding of nihilism in *Etica dell'interpretazione*, and subsequently in *Oltre interpretazione* (in the chapter entitled “Etica”), thus deepening it with an ethical dimension.¹⁴⁰ The point of departure for Vattimo’s ethical conceptions is a discussion with Gadamer and Habermas. The Italian philosopher is linked to the former by the belief that contemporary hermeneutics bears an affinity with practical philosophy traditionally understood – and thus with ethics. Hermeneutics may provide an argument undermining the domination of the scientific model of truth and knowledge, absorbing this model into the broader horizon of the logos, the lived world, and the common, historical and cultural experience shared by human communities. However, this understanding of hermeneutical ethics is not sufficient for Vattimo, since – much like the earlier discussed rhetorical-pragmatic model of truth – it is threatened by a traditionalism and conservatism resulting from a particular definition of the ethical ideal of the good life. This definition implies full integration with a totality, with a community and the world of its accepted norms and values, which are thus dangerously absolutized and treated imperatively, as a “hard” and stable ground that raises the danger of a hidden return to metaphysical thinking. In Vattimo’s opinion, a metaphysics of another type is represented by the cumbersome ethics of community developed by Apel and Habermas; this kind of ethics assumes the existence of a certain area of transparency, rationality, unlimited communication and understanding, which has – as Vattimo claims – an *a priori* character that is, to a large extent, ahistorical and rooted in transcendental philosophy. In spite of the fact that the “I” is immersed in, and subordinated to, the sphere of intersubjectivity, the community that is capable of understanding and dialoguing with itself here represents the full development of modern Cartesian subjectivity.

Vattimo juxtaposes the ethics of communication with the ethics of interpretation. In fact, one of the chapters from *Etica dell'interpretazione* is entitled “Etica della comunicazione o etica dell'interpretazione?” Vattimo characterizes this ethics of interpretation in a rather generalized manner and, in my view, it is of secondary significance compared to his ontological conceptions, which propose that nihilism is both the truly new ontology and a new mode of thinking about being capable of situating itself beyond the horizon of metaphysics.¹⁴¹ Being understood in nihilistic categories presents itself not as

140 The ethical aspect of Vattimo’s hermeneutics is heavily emphasized by Michał Januszkiwicz in the above cited *W-koło hermeneutyki literackiej*. His exhaustive presentation of Vattimo’s reflections on ethics frees me to a great extent from the need for any precise account, particularly as my interpretation places greater emphasis on the questions of weak ontology and aesthetics.

141 Vattimo, *Etica dell'interpretazione*, pp. 8-10.

essence, permanent structure, or something concrete, “hard,” or tangible, but rather as traces, messages, voices reaching the modern human being from other cultures. In these categories there are no moral laws or any profound nature or essence. There are only historical values, configurations of experience, symbolic forms or traces of life, which must be listened to and taken up with *pietas*. Such an ethics is not directed by any categorical imperative or by any principle based on metaphysics, but rather by the rule of hermeneutics – or the response. This kind of ethics, which Vattimo also calls hermeneutical ethics, is based precisely on this nihilistic ontology understood as an interpretation of events, a reading of the signs of the times, a listening in to the message, and also as a peculiar “ontology of actuality,” a diagnosis of one’s times and of the condition of the end of modernity. In this ethics, the place of principles and imperatives founded on an unchanging human nature, or on the essence of reality, is occupied instead by a broad interpretation of the traces of life, the symbolic forms of the historical configurations of experience, and messages reaching the contemporary human being from the past or from other cultures.¹⁴²

“Just because you are nobody you can talk to somebody else” – this line from a song by Olga Jackowska could, in my opinion, serve as a half-serious motto for the ethics based on nihilistic assumptions that Vattimo proposes. After all, it assumes that the “weakening” of the strong versions of subjectivity and cultural identity, as well as the rejection of belief in the existence of an unchanging, ahistorical human nature, make dialogue with the other possible. It opens the field for an encounter – the space in which a situation of mutual understanding, interpretation or translation might occur. On the other hand, one might also legitimately defend an ethics which originates in entirely different assumptions, and which proposes that it is precisely strong identity and strong rootedness in one’s own tradition that provide the most sensible conditions for a genuine dialogue with other subjects or cultures on the basis of mutual respect.

The fundamental opposition between the ethics of communication and the ethics of interpretation may also be found in *Oltre l’interpretazione*, though it is complicated by several new themes. The dialogue with various ethical concepts originating in hermeneutics, as it is broadly understood, is expanded by a third partner: alongside Habermas’s ethics of communication and Gadamer’s ethics of

142 Ethics also has a nihilistic character for “engaged” thought – such as that of Alain Badiou – though for completely different reasons from Vattimo’s. The nihilism (understood in Badiou’s writings in its traditional sense) of ethics is based on a subordination to necessity (understood as the laws of economy), conservatism, a retreat from emancipatory projects, and references to abstract human rights, which in reality are Western in nature and mask the real problems of individuals under the general formula of Otherness. See: Badiou, Alain, *Le nihilisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), pp. 194-201.

continuation (this term does not appear in the earlier cited piece, but only in *Oltre l'interpretazione*), Richard Rorty also appears, as the patron of an ethics described by Vattimo as the ethics of redescription. Vattimo reads Rorty's pragmatism – his proposal to find new lifestyles, new values and new metaphors to describe the world – as an ethical gesture characteristic of postmodernity and based on the individual's regaining of his rights to otherness and difference. Much like in the case of Gadamer's and Habermas's earlier conceptions, the ethics of redescription is not untainted by a metaphysical residue that inheres in the fact that it is based on “a philosophy of the creative genius” – in other words, it requires a “strong” subject capable of self-creation or self-invention.¹⁴³

At the risk of simplification, one might reduce this “three-fold” dialogue to an opposition that is essentially similar to the above-mentioned opposition between the rhetorical-pragmatic and aesthetic models of truth, though shifted onto the ground of ethics. I would propose to define it as an opposition between negotiation (alongside Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas we might also include Stanley Fish here) and invention (represented by Richard Rorty, but also by Derrida as the author of *Psyche*). In other words, the opposition is between the conviction that truth (as well as the sense of the world and the meaning of a text) is determined by way of conversation, consensus and negotiation variously understood, and the conviction that truth (along with the sense of the world and the meaning of the text) is invented, created or imposed in the individual's creative gesture as something new, unfamiliar and original. It would seem that the former conception is threatened not only by conformism, or rather by banality (truth being whatever is most consistent with the universally accepted image of the world), but even by a return to the correspondence conception of truth, though one by which judgment conforms not to some objective reality, but rather to public opinion. On the other hand, the danger of the latter conception might lie in a kind of interpretive solipsism, in untranslatability, and ultimately in total “anti-dialogism.” Although Vattimo accurately – in my opinion – diagnoses the essential problem of modern hermeneutical discourse, his ethics of interpretation does not suggest any convincing ways out of this situation.

Another problem – though in fact it is similar to the previous one – that Vattimo fails to perceive as he traces the metaphysical remnants in these frequently opposed attitudes (continuation and innovation) is inherent in the fact that it is difficult to imagine any minimal level of social communication without this area in which various languages and discourses can meet and “translate” themselves. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine society functioning without some

143 Vattimo, *Oltre l'interpretazione*, pp. 45-47.

sense of continuity, rootedness, or belonging, or to imagine the existence of the individual without the creation of the “I.” Vattimo’s positive ethical proposal, on the other hand, is limited to a general assertion of anti-fundamentalism, of the radical historicity of all thought and interpretation, or to the sketching of the possible emancipatory benefits flowing from the nihilistic project as a liquidation of “strong” identities. In this way, his proposal comes off somewhat weakly in comparison with the clearer ethics of communication, continuation and redescription.

Therefore, Vattimo’s conception seems more interesting when *nolens volens* it illustrates the problems in which not only his own nihilistic-interpretive ethics has become entangled, but also various types of anti-fundamentalist thought and the ethics constructed by them. The basic question confronted by this way of thinking seems to be: how can we avoid a vision of the world as an unlimited and potentially violent conflict of interpretations when we reject a vision of the world based on any permanent foundation – which, for a thinker like Vattimo, will always be marked by metaphysical violence? Vattimo’s assumption – namely that only those interpretations that do not consider themselves to be interpretations, or that treat other interpretations as errors, are capable of violence – appears to be rather weakly substantiated and rather too good-natured, much like the pragmatists’ belief that the truth is negotiated. Vattimo himself appears to have realized this, since in *Oltre l’interpretazione* – published in 1994 – he began to slowly abandon the areas of thought he had been examining from the beginning of the 1980s (or at least to submit them to a distinct reinterpretation) and to move in the direction characteristic of his late articles on Nietzsche and of his two books on religion, *Credere di credere* and *Dopo la cristianità*. This new direction of thought, more religious than ethical, is characterized by an apparently paradoxical attempt at the mutual rapprochement of nihilistic-hermeneutical thought and the Christian tradition. This attempt expresses itself in *Oltre l’interpretazione* through an endeavor to graft the idea of love, or *caritas*, onto the nihilist tradition (or rather through its treatment as the true inheritance of this tradition), as well as through the above-mentioned “weakening” of such fundamental ideas from the Nietzschean philosophical lexicon as the will to power or the *Übermensch* and the reinterpretation of strength as moderation or conscious limitation.¹⁴⁴ The question to be discussed

144 Vattimo very frequently refers, both in *Oltre l’interpretazione* and in his later pieces on Nietzsche, to the following passage from Nietzsche’s late notebooks: “And who then will show themselves to be the strongest? The most moderate ones, those who do not *need* any extreme articles of faith, those who do not merely teach, but like the great part of accident and nonsense, those who are able to think about man whilst significantly lowering his value and not becoming themselves small and weak: those of the strongest

is whether this “religious turn” runs parallel with the “ethical turn”, or whether it rather constitutes a testament to the insufficiency of the latter as a protection against violence and maybe even an acknowledgement that ethics needs another discourse to which it may (or must) refer.

Nihilistic-hermeneutical ethics also provokes Vattimo to pose questions springing from certain of its more oblique implications. The first of these concerns the status of the category of the other (or the Other) and whether it can be understood on the basis of nihilistic ethical conceptions in an absolute manner, as a source of responsibility – as, for instance, in the philosophy of Levinas. This would appear not to be the case, or at least this is the response suggested (for Vattimo does not speak directly on the subject of this category – at least not in the ethical context) both by the author’s remarks in *The End of Modernity* on the subject of anthropological otherness and the disintegration of its “strong” version in a world submitted to uniformization and globalization, and by his later religious conceptions, which place the emphasis not on the radical transcendence of God, but rather on his “weakening” and humbling in the act of incarnation. If this were indeed the case, then Vattimo’s conception would differ significantly from the majority of contemporary ethical discourses. The second matter deserving attention and deeper consideration (at this point I will only gesture towards it) concerns the relation between Vattimo’s ethics of interpretation and various ethics of reading. This relation is by no means unambiguous. On the one hand, the role elaborated by the Italian philosopher for the concept of *pietas*, with which we must take up the traces and messages of tradition, appears to be similar to re-sponsibility as the reader’s response to the message coming from the text. On the other hand, radical nihilistic ontology, when shifted onto the ground of reflections on the interpretation of the text (a shift which Vattimo does not make), may – though it clearly does not have to – result in the text being deprived of its otherness (along with its essence or substantiality), which thus makes contact with the text on the basis of dialogue impossible.

Therefore, hermeneutics in Vattimo’s understanding is closely associated with nihilism. It is the philosophy of a world in which being manifests itself as weakening and vanishing.¹⁴⁵ However, this does not mean that it constitutes a description of this world or an interpretive method or technique serving to understand and expound the condition of the human beings living within in it.

health, who are able to straighten out the majority of their misfortunes and thus do not fear them overly – people *certain of their own power*, who represent the *hard-won* strength of man with conscious pride.” (Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Pisma pozostale 1876-1889*, trans. B. Baran, Kraków: Inter Esse, 1994, pp. 210-211).

145 Vattimo, *Oltre l’interpretazione*, p. 17.

Hermeneutics has a radically ontological meaning. Indeed, it essentially *is* ontology, since it assumes that being itself has an interpretive nature, that being is a trace, a transmission of various historical horizons of experience, which demands not so much a neutral description aspiring to objectivity, but rather a response to these horizons, an active “undertaking,” a reception with *pietas*, a preserving in memory. The “nihilistic calling of hermeneutics”¹⁴⁶ depends on bringing into consciousness the fact of “weakness,” “the trace-like nature” of being and understanding, and the fact that, in the face of this situation, the only reality accessible to us is the reality of the interpretation of a world that has become story or narrative.

We may also observe this treatment of hermeneutics in Vattimo’s own writerly practice. The hermeneutics of modernity – as performed by him – is also a hermeneutics of the classic texts that describe and interpret modernity. This means that these texts also create, or rather *are*, modernity itself and the history of modernity, precisely as its grand interpretations and as the horizons of its understanding, of the “opening” in which it manifests itself to knowing and experience. Therefore, Vattimo’s own reflections often begin with the interpretation of texts written by others, not only by Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also by Gadamer, Rorty, Lyotard and Habermas.

This radical, nihilistic-ontological understanding of hermeneutics (of which Heidegger is the main patron, especially in the 32nd paragraph of *Being and Time*) is accompanied by another, less radical understanding, which might be defined as ethical-pragmatic, and which is inspired to a great extent by Gadamer’s thought. Hermeneutics is treated here as a sphere of multi-aspectual mediation: between the past and the future, between diverse social practices, diverse spheres of rationality, diverse spheres and horizons of experience. For this reason, this kind of hermeneutics may aspire – after the Marxism of the 1950s and the Structuralism of the 1960s and 1970s – to the name of the “*koine*” of contemporary culture: a plane on which the diverse discourses of late modernity can meet insofar as they share a common belief in the interpretive character of being, experience and science. For the “strong” truth of science, pretending to objectivity and to be the model and basis for all knowledge, is treated by Vattimo, in the tradition of Kuhn, as secondary in relation to the hermeneutical model of truth based on interpretation, mediation, persuasion and rhetoric. Science has a historical nature. It is a particular form of social *praxis*, always functioning within the broad linguistically, culturally and historically conditioned horizon in which a given community is immersed.

146 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Vattimo does not share Habermas's convictions about the existence of an overriding and transparent communicative rationality that functions like a peculiar base or a foundation free of mediations, thus making the construction of social consensus possible. Nevertheless, it would appear that Vattimo's pragmatic-ethical conception of hermeneutics is closer to Habermas's views than to those of Nietzsche or Heidegger. After all, according to this conception, truth is still understood as agreement – though this time not in the sense of conformity or the correspondence of judgment to an objective reality, but rather in the sense of conformism and assimilation to a generalized, trans-individual norm, whose depository is the historically conditioned *sensus communis* – a particular community sharing common assumptions and convictions. Truth depends on integration with the past, connecting with collective experience and with a defined cultural horizon.¹⁴⁷ Vattimo himself perceives a danger in such a strong privileging of the collective, pragmatic-persuasive experience of truth over individual experience. Above all, he sees in it the loss of the critical and innovative power of thought.

As early as *Al di là di soggetto* (in the chapter entitled “Esiti dell'ermeneutica”), Vattimo perceives a tension between the two poles of hermeneutical thought: the radical, nihilistic variant and the moderate, pragmatic one. In his view, this tension has accompanied all of modern hermeneutics from its very beginnings in Schleiermacher and Dilthey. On the one hand, the hermeneutics of the nineteenth century aspired to go beyond the boundaries of philology, betraying strong universalist tendencies as well as anti-fundamentalist tendencies, which are apparent, for instance, in the concept of the hermeneutic circle. On the other hand, it restrained and moderated its expansion, at least in Dilthey's division between the “interpretive” sciences of the soul and the “objective” natural sciences. These two conceptions of hermeneutics were inherited by twentieth-century philosophy. In Vattimo's view, the constructive or “foundational” aspect of hermeneutics is represented mainly by Apel, Habermas, and Ricoeur, while certain of its elements may also be observed in Gadamer's work.¹⁴⁸ Understanding and interpretation are understood in this tradition both as the decoding of a hidden, though accessible and extractable meaning, and (consequently) as an activity with the purpose of removing or liquidating any unclear or untransparent elements in the act of understanding broadly understood, which includes both the interpretation of texts and the subject or social communication. Hermeneutics thus understood is essentially the theory of an ideal and transparent social communication, in which free

147 Vattimo, *Etica dell'interpretazione*, pp. 53, 109.

148 Vattimo, *Al di là di soggetto*, pp. 102-104.

subjects exchange meanings, values and symbols without any limitations. The hermeneutical structure of experience functions here as a peculiar *a priori* of the transcendental type, guaranteeing the conditions of possibility that are indispensable to the act of communication and legitimization for the norms and criteria of judgment and actions. Vattimo perceives in this “foundational” hermeneutics the legacy of modern rationalism, with its postulates of the subject’s full transparency (in the Cartesian version) and uninterrupted historical-cultural continuity (in the Hegelian version), and with its close links with dialectical philosophy and the critique of ideology – or, more broadly, with various forms of critical thought,¹⁴⁹ which might certainly be interpreted as variants of the so-called “hermeneutics of suspicion.”

In *Al di là di soggetto*, Vattimo repeats the charges aimed at Heidegger’s successors that had appeared earlier in *Le avventure della differenza*. However, an essential difference here turns on the fact that in this critique he no longer refers to dialectical thought, but rather seeks solutions within the area of hermeneutics itself, thus attempting to build a new, more radical version of hermeneutics on the basis of a different interpretation of Heidegger’s texts. In Vattimo’s interpretation, the author of *Being and Time* is not a thinker engaged in the construction of any “positive” conception of being. Nor does he announce the possibility of any overcoming of nihilism and the return to “forgotten” being or to a being treated in quasi-religious or mystical categories.¹⁵⁰ On the contrary, the basic themes or figures of Heidegger’s thought describing the characteristic features of human existence – such as “thrownness,” “being-towards-death,” “finitude,” and a historicity radically understood as belonging to defined historico-cultural horizons – undermine, in Vattimo’s opinion, any pretensions to full transparency – of sense, text, discourse, communication – or to any totalization, appropriation, or full control over meanings.

For Vattimo the essays on hermeneutics in *Oltre l’interpretazione* – and two of them in particular: “Le verità dell’ermeneutica” and “Ricostruzione della razionalità” – are, to a certain extent, the culmination of many years of historical and theoretical reflection on the fundamental questions of modern hermeneutics. They also yield certain crucial reformulations of many of the dominant themes of Vattimo’s earlier reflections. These reformulations, in the briefest summary, are based on a distancing from the aesthetic model of truth developed most

149 Ibid., pp. 102-112.

150 Ibid., pp. 52-53. In *Oltre l’interpretazione* (p. 18), Vattimo characterizes as “rightist” those interpretations of the Heideggerian surpassing of metaphysics that see in it a striving towards the “regaining” of being, while he sees as “leftist” those that treat the history of being as a “farewell” to being and a weakening of it. Of course, Vattimo places his own interpretation on the Heideggerian “left.”

strongly in Vattimo's writings of the 1980s, as well as on attempts to reconstruct rationality within hermeneutics and to restore its critical dimension. The problem Vattimo attempts to solve may be presented as follows: the critique of the correspondence conception of truth – or more broadly of the experience of truth based on the scientific model and its characteristic models of “narrow” scientific rationality – leads Vattimo, by way of Heidegger and Gadamer, towards a manifestational conception of truth patterned on aesthetic and artistic experience and expressed most fully by the metaphor of “dwelling in”, or “belonging to”, the given historical horizon or context into which a human being has been thrown.¹⁵¹ However, this solution does not completely satisfy Vattimo. The greatest danger to which the aesthetic model of the experience of truth exposes itself is based, first of all, on its particular “conservatism” or traditionalism, on the fact that in the majority of cases it demands, directly or by implication, the classical conception of the work of art as a complete unity of content and form, of the transcendent and the empirical (in accordance with the tradition of Hegelian aesthetics), as a harmony, a reconciliation of oppositions, an integration of the diverse powers of the human mind (in accordance with the tradition of Kantian aesthetics) – in other words, as complete, closed and perfect form. In Vattimo's view, such a conception of art is, first of all, inevitably anachronistic and perhaps likely today to be perceived as kitsch, as inauthentic experience, deprived of its original power to “open” the horizons of being and truth. Secondly, it is inseparably associated with the era of metaphysics, dominated precisely by the correspondence definition of truth.¹⁵² Another danger of this model – though this time not in its classical version, but rather in the modernist, avant-garde variant – is the complete freedom and arbitrariness of the aesthetic or poetic model of understanding, an idiosyncrasy that makes any attempt at building a hermeneutical rationality impossible.¹⁵³

Therefore, the rediscovery of the links between aesthetics and hermeneutics, between the experience of art and the experience of truth, is possible only after resignation from the classical – and thus also metaphysical – conception of art. For the acceptance of this conception would result in truth as opening only being understood in categories of integration with, or rootedness and support in,

151 This metaphor clearly comes from Heidegger's writings. See his essay “Building Dwelling Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Colophon Books, 1971).

152 Vattimo, *Oltre l'interpretazione*, pp. 108-111.

153 Vattimo aims precisely the same accusation at Derrida. Therefore, the Italian philosopher would probably agree with Welsch's thesis about the birth of postmodern philosophy from the spirit of modern art insofar as it concerns deconstruction and French Post-structuralism.

historical-cultural horizons, forms of collective life, the experience of the collectivity, and its world of norms, systems of judgment and evaluation, tastes, etc. In other words, it would be understood in categories that Kant – who is not cited here by Vattimo – defined, in the context of his reflections on the judgment of taste, as the *sensus communis*, or the common sense guaranteeing the universality and inter-subjective character of the evaluation of a work of art. Vattimo accuses Gadamer in particular, as we saw earlier, precisely of this traditionalism (which risks a loss of innovative power in the domain of the aesthetic). However, it is not difficult to see that his line of argument here is also close to the critique in *Al di là di soggetto* directed against Habermas and Apel, concerning their excessive emphasis on the foundational, “positive” aspect of hermeneutics.

In order to get around these difficulties for hermeneutics, Vattimo introduces the metaphor of dwelling in the library of Babel. We might define this, using one of Vattimo’s most basic metaphors, as a “weakened” dwelling, far removed from traditional rootedness or the comforting feeling of being settled. To use a biblical association, this is more a matter of building on sand than rock. The metaphor of the library of Babel, which Vattimo borrows from Borges, and which describes the way in which the human being of late modernity experiences truth and tradition, alludes to two basic themes. First, the competency of the librarian can never aspire to the status of full and total knowledge, to transparent, adequate and epistemologically confident representation. Therefore, it is far removed from classical conceptions of truth and knowledge. Second, this library has no strong character well defined in tradition, but is rather “a net woven from a multiplicity of the voices of *Über-lieferung*, or message (not necessarily coming from the past), echoing in the language in which the claims are formulated.”¹⁵⁴ Therefore, it represents a somewhat disintegrated and pluralized tradition, though it still constitutes the most important point of reference and orientational sign for the modern human being. In “Sagezza dell’ superuomo,” which was published around the same time as *Oltre l’interpretazione*, Vattimo applies the metaphor of the tower of Babel to mass communication society, in which the nihilistic reduction of being to representation has been realized – that is, the reduction to images, simulacra and the whole imaginary of pop culture. This is a world inhabited, or dwelled in, by the Nietzschean *Übermensch* – the figure interpreted by Vattimo as the “over-man of the masses” [*oltreuomo di massa*]. This *Übermensch* makes his “I” the place of a hospitable opening to various voices reaching him from others.¹⁵⁵

This conception of “weakened” dwelling or rootedness performs several functions in Vattimo’s thought. First of all, it is supposed to prevent the

154 Vattimo, *Oltre l’interpretazione*, p. 113.

155 Vattimo, *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, p. 194.

hermeneutical horizon (of tradition, the cultural context, and so on) from “stiffening” and turning into a quasi-metaphysical and fundamentalist *Grund*, an authoritarian “final instance,” a strong basis entirely determining understanding and interpretation and thus bringing it closer to representational thought. Beyond that, it is meant to protect the critical dimension of hermeneutics, since it allows for a certain distance to be maintained from the specific context of the horizon of understanding, and thus for an engagement in its transformation – using Vattimo’s words, it allows for an active, interpretive belonging. Finally, in spite of the charges of irrationalism directed at hermeneutics, it is supposed to make possible the construction of a hermeneutical rationality. This is not a rationality of the scientific or scientistic type. Neither is it the nineteenth-century historical rationality (though, as Vattimo insists, hermeneutical rationality enters into *Verwindung* relations with both these types of rationality). Instead, it is rationality as a basic orientation in the world and culture as a net of messages, or rationality as an interpretive competency: “The destiny of being clearly manifests itself only in interpretation. It has no objective or deterministic power. It is *Geschick* in the sense of *Schickung*, or message. We might explain it as follows: the rationality available to us depends on the fact that we are always entangled in the process (we are always already “thrown” into it) and that we already know, at least to a certain extent, where we are headed and where we ought to be headed. However, in order to attain orientation we must reconstruct and reinterpret this process in the fullest and most convincing way. It would be a mistake to believe that we can situate ourselves outside this process and somehow capture the *arché*, reason, essence, or final structure. Rationality is only a guiding thread that we are able to understand thanks to attentive listening to the messages of *Schickung*.”¹⁵⁶

The Death of Art, Death in Art

Earlier I mentioned the roles played in Vattimo’s philosophy by art and aesthetic experience as models of truth. The second crucial and original theme in Vattimo’s aesthetic reflections, which allows for a new conceptualization of many twentieth-century artistic and literary phenomena, concentrates on the idea of the death of art. Much like nihilism, this death is understood as a fundamental event in modern culture, as an essential aspect of the fulfillment of metaphysics, and simultaneously as a harbinger of its *Verwindung*.

156 Vattimo, *Oltre l’interpretazione*, p. 135.

The question of the death or decline of art has occupied, from Hegel's time, an important place in modern aesthetic thought and has been understood in various ways. In Hegel's conception, as is well known, the death of art signifies the fact that art as the alienation (*Entfremdung*) of spirit in sensual form becomes unnecessary when spirit reaches a state of complete transparency and reconciliation with its own essence, a state in which mediations will no longer be necessary.¹⁵⁷ This dialectical sense of the death of art may be found in certain aesthetic concepts originating in the neo-avant-garde, for instance in the work of Jean Galard, for whom the real victory of the aesthetic project and the liberation of its utopian-revolutionary potential depends on going beyond both the narrow, institutional boundaries of art and the collapse of the traditional concept of the work of art, as well as on the abolition of the (bourgeois) social order (which has created the division between the "ugly," trivial sphere of everyday existence and the compensatory domain of the "beautiful" and of art). In this way, an aesthetic dimension is gained both for individual existence and for politics and social life.¹⁵⁸ The phenomenon described by Mike Featherstone, among others, as the "aestheticization of everyday life"¹⁵⁹ may also be interpreted as the death of art – in other words, the identification of the aesthetic with the sphere of the media and mass-produced images. Vattimo defines this as the technological version of the death of art and differentiates it from the utopian-revolutionary variant.¹⁶⁰

Certain themes from these conceptions of the death of art – mentioned here in the briefest overview – can also be found in Vattimo's work, though they are submitted to far-reaching interpretation. It is difficult to detect in Vattimo's writings any traces of dialectical thinking about the death of art. Instead, his concepts appear to bear an affinity with the more marginal aspects of Hegelian aesthetics, in which art is treated as a loosening and weakening of spirit, or as excess (*Überfluss*).¹⁶¹ In my view, it is precisely from these Hegelian aspects – to a much greater extent than from Heidegger's thought – that Vattimo takes his resonant and highly prevalent metaphor of the ornament. In *The Transparent Society*, the ornament is identified with the beautiful, whereas in Vattimo's later works it functions as a metaphor describing the state of postmodern culture as a whole, focused on that which is marginal, peripheral, while also talking about de-realization of being and the dissolution of its "strong" forms into a world of

157 See: Hegel, G.W.F., *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

158 See: Galard, Jean, *Mort des beaux-arts* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971).

159 See: Featherstone, Mike, "Postmodernism and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life," *Modernity and Identity*, eds. J. Friedman & S. Lash (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

160 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, pp. 46-47.

161 See: Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*.

images and simulacra. It is precisely in this place that both traditions of thinking about the death of art meet in Vattimo's thought – both the “purified” dialectical tradition and the reinterpreted aesthetic-technological tradition

In spite of these borrowings, the event of the decline of art gains a specific meaning in Vattimo's interpretation that accords with the assumptions of his nihilistic “weak” ontology. The death of art does not so much signify the end of art as an autonomous realm separate from other areas of human experience, but rather represents a distinct manifestation – considering the central character of aesthetic discourse for modernity – of the history of being as the “weakening” of its strong form, its collapse, disappearance or withdrawal.

The nature of Vattimo's understanding of the death of art – or, as the Italian philosopher himself prefers to express it, the decline of art – is highly visible in his polemic with the representatives of the Frankfurt School, especially with Adorno. The axis of this polemic – aside from the modern condition of the work of art – is mass communication, mass society in general, and the condition of the human beings functioning within it. Vattimo interprets Adorno's thought as an unambiguous critique of European culture and a condemnation of scientific-technological civilization in its fundamental aspects. This critique is delivered in the name of such categories as humanism, authenticity and truth. In such allusions to these categories, Vattimo sees the remnants of metaphysical and realist thinking,¹⁶² which continue to burden Adorno's philosophy – and indeed the whole of twentieth-century existential philosophy. The presence of these remnants expresses an attempt to regain, reappropriate and return to a real human nature threatened by dehumanization and the total organization of mass societies. Vattimo, on the other hand, draws on the Heideggerian interpretation of scientific-technological civilization as *Gestell*. He thus sees in this civilization not so much a danger to human nature that can be dispelled by the restoration to the subject of its central function, which has been undermined by the natural sciences, but rather an opportunity for an entirely new mode of manifestation for the human being – beyond the horizon of traditional humanism based on the understanding of the human being as subject, basis and foundation.

Similarly, Vattimo views the mass media not as a danger to the individual and to culture, not as an instrument of control, domination, manipulation, or the leveling of society and its total organization, as Adorno does, but rather as an opportunity for its emancipation. The world of the media, thanks to the technological means at its disposal, weakens and undermines the metaphysical belief in the existence of one true reality, of the “hard” fact. Instead, it introduces multiple worlds with an equal, “weakened” status,” and brings about

162 Vattimo, *La società trasparente*, p. 115.

the “derealization” [*derealizzazione*] of reality and the blurring of the border between the real and the imagined, between truth and fiction, thus enacting the Nietzschean idea of the “true world” that has become a fairy tale.¹⁶³ If this is the case, then mass communication and mass culture, along with the kitsch that is inseparable from them, are not a threat to true, authentic art. Contrary to Adorno’s claims, art does not have to seek an escape in self-destruction, self-negation, or in a silence that, in the aesthetic domain, is the equivalent of the return to an unfalsified, authentic existence. Vattimo does not diagnose pessimistically the melting of art into the mass media, which involves, on the one hand, the aestheticization of the media, and, on the other, such phenomena as mass reproduction and the inevitably concomitant disappearance of the aura of the unrepeatable work (to use the language of Benjamin, whom Vattimo frequently cites, as in “L’arte dell’oscillazione” from *La società trasparente*, and treats generally much more favorably than Adorno). These phenomena do not imply a loss of, betrayal of, or departure from the true essence of art comparable with the loss of the essence of humanity, which must be compensated for by diverse variants on the rhetoric of return, restoration or nostalgia. Instead, they are, as Vattimo likes to repeat, a historical event revealing the new condition of art in postmodern society. Moreover, the undermining of the traditional, classical conception of the work of art as a closed, perfect, or complete form that reconciles the external with the internal, form with content – a concept based on metaphysical premises – allows for the preservation of the distinct status of art as the Heideggerian “place where truth is deposited,” as a particularly sensitive “sensor” that registers most fully changes in the status and understanding of being itself in the era of fulfilled metaphysics.

As usual, Heidegger is the patron of Vattimo’s reflections, this time largely as the author of “The Origin of the Work of Art.” Vattimo reads this foundational text for weak aesthetics – I would propose precisely this term, “weak aesthetics,” to describe the concepts developed by Vattimo, which deserve “strong” attention on the map of modern aesthetic theories – in a way that accents three fundamental themes. Firstly, he understands the work as the place of truth’s occurrence. Secondly, of the two aspects of the work defined as “world” and “earth,” he places the accent firmly on the latter. Thirdly, the manifestation of the truth of the work of art is the trace.

The first theme, captured from various perspectives, appears in all of Vattimo’s most important writings concerning aesthetics, in which I would include, in chronological order, his essays on the truth of art in *The End of Modernity*, “L’arte dell’oscillazione” and “Dall’utopia all’eterotopia” from *La*

163 *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14, 115.

società trasparente, as well as the last and perhaps culminating installment of his aesthetic reflections, “Arte” from *Oltre l’interpretazione*. Much like Heidegger’s other successors, Vattimo considers the work of art not to be a self-referential game of forms and meanings closed within the domain of aesthetic experience, but rather treats it ontologically, as a certain mode of the revelation and manifestation of the truth of being. Nevertheless, what distinguishes his interpretation is a strong emphasis on the “nihilistic” character of the truth that deposits itself in the work. Thus, it is not a truth understood as full self-presence, self-presentation, or as any other essential form of authentic, original presence, but rather a “weak truth,”¹⁶⁴ which speaks about the departure and collapse of being in the era of the decline of metaphysics and late modernity. This truth is expressed not so much in the sphere of the work’s broad content, its message or apparent content, but rather in a new, “weak” ontology of the work and in a change in the social status of art, especially in such phenomena as the above-mentioned spread of kitsch, the changeability of fashions, the eclecticism and ephemerality of art, the collecting or even museum-like quality that tears works from their natural context and deprives them of their unique aura.¹⁶⁵ In short, this truth is expressed in the crisis of “high” art, and in the transformation of art in general into popular, mass art.

In *Oltre l’interpretazione*, Vattimo distances himself not only from Kantian aesthetics, but also, to a much greater extent, from the Heideggerian conception of the work of art, especially from those interpretations of it that emphasize the manifestational character of the truth given within the work. A new theme connects these diagnoses, which we might define as the end of the myth of the aesthetic, or as the end of the belief in the particular, epistemological value of art. Vattimo calls this theme the “desacralization of art,” which runs parallel to the process of secularization that characterizes the whole of modernity. This process is based on art’s loss of status as a secular religion or mythology (which the Romantics in particular promoted), its loss of “substantiality,” or its meaning in modern social life, but also on its transformation into a commodity and total submission to market mechanisms.

In the context of Vattimo’s reflections on the Heideggerian version of the truth of the work of art, the emphasis clearly shifts from the aspect that Heidegger calls the “worldly,” which is associated with the “uncovering,” prophetic, originary character of the work as an opening to new historical horizons and new possible meanings of existence, to the “earthly” aspect, which

164 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 79.

165 Vattimo, *La società trasparente*, pp. 96-98.

refers to mortality, finitude and hiddenness.¹⁶⁶ In my view, it is precisely the emphasis on this particular aspect of the work of art – and, indirectly, of understanding – that determines the radical nature of Vattimo’s hermeneutics.¹⁶⁷

Two examples may serve to illustrate Vattimo’s way of thinking, which privileges the aspect of the work of art that is close to Heideggerian earthliness and that Vattimo defines with the above-mentioned concept of *sfondante* (referring to those dimensions of the work that “destroy,” conceal and undermine meanings, as well as remove the permanent foundations of understanding), while giving less attention to the “constructive,” founding or opening aspects (in other words, on those aspects that are closer to “worldliness” or defined by Vattimo with the term *fondante*). The first of these examples shows one of many attempts by Vattimo to connect the traditions of the philosophy of difference and dialectics (in its “disintegrating” version) – to connect the lexicon of Heidegger and the lexicon of Benjamin. In the idea of “intoxication” from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and the idea of *Stoss* from “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Vattimo discerns different attempts to capture the essence of modern art, which depends on the permanent and intentional – rather than accidental – disorientation of the viewer, on an effect of strangeness, on a suspension of the self-evident truths of the world, on the impossibility of the work’s referring to a stable, previously established semantic order. This kind of art, concentrated not on the work but on experience, removes the basis for any nostalgia for the permanence of the work or for the authenticity of its survival. Instead, it alludes to impermanence, mortality, randomness, ephemerality, collapse and meaninglessness.¹⁶⁸

The second example is even more important for the perspective being presented here, since it shows the role of the trace in the ontology of the work of art. In his commentary on the famous Heideggerian example of the Greek temple, which “does not copy anything” but “simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley,” Vattimo passes over the religious meanings of the temple, which are clearly present in Heidegger’s text, since God makes himself present in the temple, and thus the precinct of the holy is delimited. Instead, Vattimo concentrates on those meanings that refer to the historical destiny of the human collectivity gathered around the temple. He also proposes to define this historicity with the word “trace,” which is meant to emphasize the residual or

166 The ideas of “world” and “earth” in Heidegger’s essay are discussed by Cezary Woźniak in his book, *Martina Heideggera myślenie sztuki* (Kraków: Universitas, 1997), pp. 59-76.

167 On the subject of radical hermeneutics, see Norbert Leśniewski’s “Hermeneutyka radykalna” and Michał Januszkiewicz’s *W-kolo hermeneutyki*.

168 Vattimo, *La società trasparente*, pp. 70-82.

“remnant” character of the historical way of experiencing the work.¹⁶⁹ By developing these formulations, one might say that the work refers to the world in the sense that it imitates (or “traces”) it, though not in the common understanding of this word, meaning mimicry or copying, but rather in the sense of an “opening” of the world by the work. In other words, its apparent message and meaning do not depend on the depositing, conserving and faithful transmission in unchanging form of some unchanging, self-identical and ahistorical meaning, but rather on exposing itself to the traces of the world, and to the destructive action of passing time. This brings about a depletion of meanings and a loss of that which can be reconstructed and understood in the equally historically limited act of interpretation, but it also brings a peculiar proliferation of meanings precisely in the form of these traces, which are gathered and imprinted in the work itself, as well as around the work in interpretations of it, simultaneously revealing meanings for the work and, by necessity, passing them by or concealing them. Precisely in this “trace” meaning, based on the simultaneous loss and proliferation of sense (thus reflecting the dispute between the world and the earth in Heidegger’s conception, as well as the constant oscillation between the foundational, constructive dimension and the undermining, destructive dimension of understanding in Vattimo’s work), we can talk about the historicity and truth of the work of art, which, as Heidegger writes, depend on the binding together and concentration of “birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline.”¹⁷⁰

Thus, the history of being appears in the work not so much in the sphere of its apparent meanings, but rather in its very artistic form, in its “weak” character, which emphasizes transience, “the breakdown of the poetic word,” the destruction, imperfection and heterogeneity that are so evident in the practices of parody, pastiche, intertextuality, as well as in the question of the trace and in monumentality. This strong emphasis on the dark, nihilistic dimension of art and its truth distinguishes Vattimo’s interpretations of Heideggerian aesthetics from other readings that focus more on the aspect of the work that projects and “opens” possibilities, as well as establishing meanings.¹⁷¹

The metaphor of the monument that appears in Vattimo’s interpretation in reference to being and truth conceals within itself two semantic threads. The

169 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, pp. 66- 67.

170 Heidegger, Martin, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 167.

171 See, among others, the texts contained in the volume, *Heidegger and the Question of Literature: Toward a Postmodern Literary Hermeneutics*, ed. W.V. Spanos (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

first thread points to the importance of the continuity or duration of that which comes from the past and bears the character of a certain prevailing norm – of that which demands respect – as well as the importance of “taking up” and continuation. Truth as monument is the opposite of truth understood as *nouveauté*. The latter has been associated with the modern paradigm of progress, while also assuming a constantly renewed gesture of renewal as purification, of a return to the origins, to essence, to the foundation. However, the metaphor of the monument also refers – and this is the second semantic thread inherent in it – to what Noica calls the fragile being of culture. The monument is not a metaphysical foundation, but a trace, an event from the past. It has no permanent character, but preserves an opening, and submits to constant interpretation and reinterpretation, while also preserving its status of otherness, since it is not something that we can fully and freely possess, or wholly assimilate or control. Much like the category of repetition, it refers both to identity and to difference. It both situates (*loca*) us, or roots us in a certain tradition, and “de-situates” (*disloca*) us, marking our difference from that tradition. In this way, it preserves the power of innovation, the ability to generate new meanings and values.¹⁷²

Vattimo’s conception of the monument – which appears frequently and with various meanings throughout his writings – calls to mind the motto, *exegi monumentum, aere perennius*. In this Horatian formula, the permanence of the “I” and the certainty of its cultural existence even after physical death are guaranteed by the permanence and unchangeability of memory, while memory itself finds support in the perfection and finitude – in the double meaning of the Latin *perfectum* – of artistic form. Vattimo clearly reverses this formula. Instead, he emphasizes the impermanence, fragility and weakness of the work-monument, which by its very essence is exposed to changeability and the destructive action of time. Moreover, this action is not treated as a negative element, but rather as a component of the very structure of the work, which paradoxically acts to constitute it thanks to this destructive power. Therefore, the monument understood in this manner does not fit into the realm of a confident, entirely unclouded memory guaranteeing the transparency of self-knowledge and preserving meanings from the past in untainted form; rather, it belongs to the intermediary realm between memory and forgetting, unhiddenness and hiddenness. The monumentality of the work, as assimilation of the past in the form of traces and remnants, as that which remains and not that which endures –

172 See: Vattimo, *Etica dell’interpretazione*, pp. 140-148. Vattimo’s ideas here are close to the reflections of Paul Ricoeur, who writes in “Le texte comme identité dynamique” (from *L’Hermeneutique biblique*, Paris: Cerf, 2001) about the sedimentation of innovation in the context of the category of narration and its association with tradition.

it is in this sense that Vattimo interprets Hölderlin's line, glossed by Heidegger, that "what remains is founded by the poets" – therefore signifies, first of all, a breaking with the typical avant-garde logic of novelty, progress, overcoming and innovation in favor of a logic closer to *Verwindung*. Second, it signifies the undermining of the formalist or structuralist conception of poetic language as a self-referential play of meanings and various levels of language – a conception that, in Vattimo's interpretation, has constituted a confirmation of the freedom of the creative subject insofar as it has represented a break with the practical or useful applications of language. The monument-trace, on the other hand, in its most basic dimension of temporal duration, is a transmitted tradition aimed towards the other, exposing itself to his readings and interpretations, representing – as traces of time – the immanent component of the work, rather than some incidental "baggage" imposed on an objective and unchanging structure or essence.

The Abyss of Language

Precisely this "nihilistic" thread to Vattimo's aesthetics is particularly apparent in his reflections on poetic language, which are contained largely in two essays: "Heidegger e la poesia como tramonto del linguagio" from *Al di là di soggetto* and a chapter from *The End of Modernity* entitled "The Shattering of the Poetic Word." The unity of thought and argument of these two pieces is emphasized by the fact that the latter begins with the very same quotation from Heidegger's reflections on the poetry of Stefan George that concludes the former. Both pieces reveal the importance of the experience of language and literature for Vattimo's hermeneutics, and both allow him to formulate conclusions for poetics and the theory of poetic language on the basis of the general – ontological, epistemological and aesthetic – assumptions of weak thought. The point of departure here is the entire hermeneutical tradition's characteristic belief in the particular and distinctive importance of linguistic traditions for the process of understanding – a belief radicalized in its ontological, Heideggerian version in a thesis claiming that the event of being takes the form of a linguistic tradition.

Vattimo considers Heidegger's philosophy to be the conceptual apparatus that most accurately and completely explains the ontological bases of the artistic and linguistic experiments of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, whose meaning only becomes clear when it is linked to the end of metaphysics and the associated concept of language as representation – whether of the objective world of things, in the classic or mimetical version, or of the subjective world of the subject's feelings and impressions, in the Romantic version. Vattimo

accepts, in its basic outline, the aletheic, manifestational conception of the language of poetry, which assumes that its truth does not take the form of correspondence or adequation, but rather of uncovering or revealing unacknowledged regions of being and the ways in which humans can experience it. However, in Vattimo's interpretation the emphasis shifts, much as in his reflections on the subject of the death of art, to the dimension of hiddenness, mortality, and – in this case with particularly strong emphasis – silence, as the “other side” of language. Silence is not only the origin of language, the “positive” background that is indispensable to its coming into existence and finds its explanation and reason to be in the order of meaning, but also the radical, “negative” silence of death, nothingness, non-being. It is precisely in this context that Vattimo interprets the Heideggerian formulation of the disappearance of the word and its return to voicelessness.¹⁷³ Both aspects of poetic language – the originary, opening, grounding aspect, which assigns senses and names the unnamed, and the aspect in which what comes to the fore is groundlessness, the experience of non-sense, the impossibility of a linguistic, narrational, semiotic ordering of the world, the collapse of the symbolic order, the encounter with that which (from the perspective of the signifier and its power of expression) is other – are inseparably linked, with priority even being given to the second aspect: “At the basis of all grounding [*fondazione*], including that which is performed by poets – “founding what endures” – is an abyss of groundlessness [*sfondazione*]. The grounding language of the poet only grounds under the condition that it enters – and to the extent that it enters – into relations with that which is other to it, with silence. This is not merely the soundless horizon that the word needs in order to sound – that is, to constitute itself in its consistency of being. It is also the bottomless abyss in which the word pronounced *loses* itself. In the confrontation with language, silence functions like death in the confrontation with life.”¹⁷⁴

This quotation from Vattimo allows for at least two interpretations. The first of these we might call the “moderate” interpretation, requiring us to see in the gesture of falling silent a kind of negative poetics, a poetics of the inexpressible, or perhaps a negative, critical step on the path to the purification of language from the banality of everyday chatter, and a striving towards a more authentic speech, somehow closer to the original truth of being. However, this would indicate the necessity of taking on an apophatic perspective (which is fundamentally alien to Vattimo, even when his philosophy opens itself up to the previously absent religious dimension). It is precisely from this perspective that

173 See: Heidegger, Martin, *On the Road to Language* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982).

174 Vattimo, *Al di là di soggetto*, pp. 86-87.

Vattimo reads – interestingly, though perhaps controversially – post-structuralist philosophy in general, and, more specifically, the conceptions of Derrida, Lacan and Deleuze. Absence, the trace and simulacra are merely figures of thought that affirm in a negative way a primeval, originary presence, and express an irremovable nostalgia for that presence.¹⁷⁵ Perhaps a more appropriate or obvious critical point of reference here would be Adorno’s conception of silence and the death of art, with which Vattimo will eventually polemicize in *The End of Modernity*, or perhaps Gadamer’s reading of Celan’s poetry. As far as I can tell, the Italian philosopher refers to neither. Gadamer would appear to be a potentially interesting discussion partner for Vattimo, since he finds in Celan’s poetry a veiling of sense and the collapse of the expectation that sense will be constituted, though ultimately he seeks “founding” or “worldly” aspects here, possibilities for the rescue of language’s authenticity from everyday gibberish and mass communication – in other words, for its deeper grounding thanks to the particular, originary power of poetic language.¹⁷⁶

The second, more radical interpretation treats silence as the full negation of the possibility of meaning and seems to be closer to the thought of Vattimo, whose proposal can be read, regardless of his interpretation of Derrida, as an alternative to deconstruction’s critique of meaning. While deconstruction describes the dissemination of meaning, its deferral, and the impossibility of its constitution as full presence in a process of infinite semiosis, in which signifiers continually refer to one another with no possibility of going beyond the chain of *signifiants*, Vattimo’s proposal criticizes the “imperialism of the signifier” (Vattimo’s expression) that characterizes both structuralism and post-structuralism. Instead, Vattimo assumes that there is the possibility of an authentic speech based on the utterance’s reference to that which is “other than the signifier, other than language.”¹⁷⁷ At the same time, Vattimo is a long way from the type of critique of structuralism developed, for instance, by Paul Ricoeur, who reveals in language two complementary dimensions: meaning and event – in other words, immanent, objective meaning and reference, which is possible thanks to an intentional “going beyond” language towards the world. The “leap beyond language” that interrupts the self-reference of discourse is possible – according to Ricoeur – because the original, pre-linguistic fact is

175 Ibid., p. 80.

176 See: Gadamer, Hans-Georg, “Are the Poets Falling Silent?”, *Hans-Georg Gadamer On Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, eds. D. Misgeld and G. Nicholson (New York: SUNY Press, 1992). Vattimo’s conceptions would probably be closer to the reading of Celan’s poetry performed by Derrida in “Shibboleth: For Paul Celan” and his theme of the trace as remnant or ash.

177 Vattimo, *Al di là di soggetto*, pp. 75, 83.

human existence in the world, which is what makes the expression of experience in language possible.¹⁷⁸ In Vattimo's work too, language refers to something beyond itself. However, for Vattimo this is not the world of experience – which constitutes the condition for the possibility of meaning, the point of reference or particular ground for speech – but rather nature, or *physis*. At the same time, nature is not understood here as the biological foundation from which culture springs, nor as the origin of experience and meaning, but rather as animality, finitude, mortality, nothingness, and silence in the sense of that which is non-linguistic or even deprived of any meaning – in other words, that which is “other” in relation to culture as symbolic order, and therefore that which is semiotized, expressed or expressible, experiential, endowed with a story or narrative.¹⁷⁹ Therefore, the Ricoeurian “leap beyond language” in Vattimo's work is based not on an attempt to restore the reference and to ground language in some form of *Lebenswelt*. Instead, it constitutes a Heideggerian leap – shifted to the realm of linguistic reflection – into a groundlessness in which all meaning, either existential or linguistic, is lost, while language constantly approaches the boundaries of the meaningful and the expressible.

Perhaps it is in this essay on the “decline of language” where Vattimo takes up most emphatically the question of that which is “other” in relation to language, culture, the logos, and the sphere of meaning. This question can be interpreted as a challenge originating in the realm of hermeneutics itself to its various traditional types – such as the conceptions of Ricoeur or Gadamer, which set themselves the goal of assimilating meaning and making it transparent. However, this is not all. The idea of *sfondazione* in Vattimo's writings, much like “earth” in Heidegger's work or “becoming towards becoming” in Noica's thought, emphasizes the fragility and uncertainty of culture as a foundation for human activities and behaviors, the collapse of culture into the perverse and unstable (both literally and metaphorically) foundation of nature. In a similar way, it is in nature – on rock – that the temple is set down in Heidegger's essay on the work of art. Therefore, we might pose the question as to whether nature, as that which is other to culture and the place of its “falling away,” is not also the boundary of the conception of “cultural nature” so frequently adopted in various kinds of modern thought– that is, the

178 Ricoeur, Paul, *Język, tekst, interpretacja* [*Language, Text, Interpretation*], trans. K. Rosner and P. Graff (Warszawa: PIW, 1989), pp. 91-92.

179 Vattimo, *Al di là di soggetto*, pp. 92-93. Here Vattimo's thought, despite his own declarations, appears to be close to Lacan and his conception of the real and of an originary absence as the negative origin of language. Cf. Fuery, Patrick, *Theory of Absence* (London: Greenwood Press, 1995), pp. 91-102.

omnipotence of interpretation and the universalization of the cultural mediations of human experience.

Vattimo's thinking in *The End of Modernity* and his thinking in "Heidegger e la poesia como tramonto del linguaggio" tend in a fundamentally similar direction. Nevertheless, we may observe a basic difference in the fact that, in *The End of Modernity*, the question of language's reference to nature as groundlessness slips into the background, while the crucial role falls instead to the metaphor of the monument, previously developed with reference to art in general, but here adapted to describe the status of poetic language. The point of departure is once again the link between language and mortality, which Vattimo sees not only in the late Heidegger, as in his texts from *On the Road to Language*, but also in *Being and Time*. Language belongs to people as finite and mortal beings, while its authenticity is motivated by consent to death as a condition for the authenticity of a being's existence. But what are the concrete consequences for a conception of poetic language originating in a definition of poetry as a language in which it is not only the world as a system of uncovered, openly expressed and articulated meanings that comes to the fore, but also earthliness as mortality?¹⁸⁰ The characteristics of this "weak" poetic language are easier to capture by juxtaposing them with the most significant modern theories of the language of literature – and particularly of poetry. Earlier, I mentioned the critique aimed by Vattimo at the avant-garde model of poetic language – above all, this language seems to be decidedly different from the symbolist conception of language. In fact, according to Vattimo, poetic language is privileged over everyday linguistic experience, though this privileging does not take the form of an opposition between a "high" poetic language – which is hermetic, authentic, capable of reaching to the "depths" and essence of being – and a banal, common, everyday language – which is transparent and capable of communicating only superficial phenomena and experiences. On the contrary, Vattimo interprets the truth, authenticity, and originary nature of poetic language as a particular ability to shatter and undermine meaning, as its "weakening."

The formula of "weakness" is a very expansive one, which is precisely what forms part of its attraction (though it clearly creates certain dangers as well). This attraction flows from the fact that the formula may be applied to a wide variety of modern poetic phenomena: to Dadaist and surrealist experiments, to certain kinds of textual collage, or to operations based on the introduction of conversational and everyday speech to poetry, with all their "banality" and randomness. By referring to readings performed by Derrida, we might also find in modern poetry the two modes of critique of meaning already mentioned

180 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 64.

above: on the one hand, dissemination, deferral, and suspension, and on the other hand, weakening, “falling away,” or blurring. I would identify the specific outline of the latter critique in the trace-like conception of poetic form as “the anticipation of the essential erosion to which time subjects the work, *reducing it to the monument*.”¹⁸¹ I shall take up this line of thought in the third part of this book, where I attempt to read selected literary works.

Vattimo’s remarks on poetic language and its dimensions – worldly or founding, as well as earthly or shattering – also allow for a relatively clear polarization of the field of modern negative poetics. The first pole would be represented by Rilke, as the author of an untitled poem opening with “Thus we became dreamy violinists. . . ,” where silence serves the true voice and the existence of that which endures makes itself felt behind the futilities of time.¹⁸² The second pole is represented by Samuel Beckett and Tadeusz Różewicz.

Or is it the case, looking at Vattimo’s reflections from a slightly broader perspective, that the two threads inherent to his aesthetic thought – earth and world, founding or grounding and the removal of the ground, along with the parallel themes of art as the unmethodical experience of truth and art as story about the decline of being – may in fact be easily reconciled with each other and inscribed into a single, coherent perspective of art as the metaphysical experience of truth in the form of event? After all, on the one hand, art treated as an “opening” of new perspectives on reality, new meanings or horizons of experience, and thus as a domain of free creation, originality and invention, appears to confirm the creative possibilities of the subject and therefore its freedom, as well as the value of such categories as novelty, authenticity, the origin, the project, and “strong,” utopian social thought. Therefore, it would perhaps be closer to “strong” artistic form, especially in the modern or avant-garde version, with all the baggage of its metaphysical and modern connotations. On the other hand, art that expresses itself in “weak” artistic form, exhibiting the ideas of the trace, remnant, memory and monument, manifests itself as “closure,” “concealment,” an exposure of the weakness of being, a harbinger of the end of metaphysics and of modernity. A solution based on introducing a division between modern and postmodern art cannot be regarded as entirely satisfying. In fact, it simply shifts the problem to another location, since the question at once arises as to what extent modern art inscribes itself into and confirms the metaphysical perspective, or whether and to what degree it

181 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

182 Rilke, Rainer Maria, *The Book of Images*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), p. 141.

goes beyond this perspective. It is difficult to find in Vattimo's reflections an unambiguous and entirely convincing solution to this problem.

It would seem that these contradictions – if indeed they truly are contradictions – are, to a certain extent, analogical to the ambiguities that characterize Vattimo's conception of nihilism, which at times is treated as an event affecting being itself, at other times as a certain diagnosis of modern culture. They also run parallel with his conception of hermeneutics, in which we can find both a radical, ontological thread and a more moderate, pragmatic thread. There is no way here to clearly determine whether these contradictions are contradictions in Vattimo's own discourse, or rather in modern aesthetic – and, more broadly, hermeneutical – discourse as a whole. Nevertheless, perhaps it is precisely these dichotomies inherent in aesthetic discourse, along with its relatively high burden of “metaphysicality,” which have caused Vattimo in more recent years to abandon the realm of aesthetics in his search for an unmetaphysical conception of truth, and to turn instead towards religious experience, towards ideas such as *caritas* or *amicitia*, love and friendship. For, as Saint Augustine pronounced, before Pascal, *non intratur in veritatem nisi per caritatem* (one cannot enter into the truth except by love). Thus, perhaps the language of faith is precisely that discourse in which we may talk about being without falling into the violence that characterizes the “strong” categories of metaphysics, especially in its modern version.

It is indeed the sphere of ethical experience, or of ethical-religious experience, that may be regarded as the second language – alongside aesthetics – of weak thought. The place of the “strong” epistemological relation is occupied both by contemplation, remembrance and the remembering of the transmitted tradition of being, which always conceals itself and is never fully made present, and by such categories as *pietas* and *caritas*, which assume not the will to knowledge or knowing, but rather respect, kindness, solicitude and care for that which happens, that which is marked by finitude, mortality, and deficiency, and that which speaks to us in multiple voices worth being listened to and taken up. However, as in Noica's work, this ethical dimension does not have an imperative or normative character with support in the sphere of rationality, but instead takes the form of an “ethics of goods.” Characteristically, and perhaps paradoxically, Vattimo strives to discover this ethical dimension – of moderation, *caritas* – in the Nietzschean figure of the *Übermensch*, whom – contrary to the letter of the text – Vattimo attempts to submit to “weakening.”¹⁸³ However, the superior role with respect to the two dimensions of weak thought – aesthetic and ethical – is taken by the metaphysics of the trace, or of the sign.

183 Vattimo, “La saggezza dell' superuomo,” *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, pp. 192-194.

This is juxtaposed very strongly with the metaphysics of presence.¹⁸⁴ “That which determines the subjectivity of subjects is not their stubborn endurance against (*gegen-stand*), but rather their occurring, or their existence exclusively by the power of opening,”¹⁸⁵ writes Vattimo. Therefore, the difference between strong thought and weak thought might ultimately be described by means of the opposition between representation and imitation (“tracing”), treated as two opposing epistemological strategies, two diametrically opposed ways in which thought refers to the world. Strong thought re-presents things and beings in order to make them fully transparent and knowable to the subject. Otherwise expressed, it doubles or repeats them, replacing the absent thing with its substitute.¹⁸⁶ On the other hand, weak thought – which opens itself to tradition, message, and heritage, accepting its own “weak” nature, since this nature is always mediated in a concrete tradition and marked by deficiency, accident and fallenness – imitates (or “traces”). Weak thought follows the traces, tracks them and reads them, responds to them with its own trace.

Certainly, we do not find in Vattimo’s writings the profound and original consideration of being that we find in Heidegger’s work, nor the interpretive virtuosity of Derrida. The value of Vattimo’s analysis depends more on his creation of a certain comprehensive – which does not mean synthetic or systematic – landscape of modern thought and culture, by uniting the various threads, by moving freely through diverse realms, not only philosophical or ontological, but also anthropological, sociological and cultural. This value is also based on Vattimo’s attempts to capture and describe the fundamental dimensions and aspects of the experience of late modernity.

It is difficult not to notice that a deathly or funereal tone prevails in the works of Vattimo’s “hermeneutic” period, and especially in *The End of Modernity*: the death of art, the weakness of being and thinking, nihilism, the separation from metaphysics and from everything in culture and human experience based upon it, and the titular “end of modernity.” Indeed, it would seem that Vattimo’s reflections, as well as his favorite themes and metaphors, must be placed in the context of such key figures of post-metaphysical thought as decline, sublimity, nostalgia, melancholy, and absence.

184 Here I am referring to the distinction introduced by Barbara Skarga in her book, *Ślad i obecność* (Warszawa: PWN, 2002), pp. 29-54.

185 Vattimo, *Pensiero debole*, p. 10.

186 Lorenc, Iwona, *Świadomość i obraz: Studia z filozofii przedstawienia* (Warszawa: Scholar, 2001), p. 146.

II. THE WEAK ONTOLOGY OF THE LITERARY WORK

Introduction

The specter of “weakness” – in the figurative sense – has been circulating in literary theory for some time. This metaphor has been used here in two basic contexts: 1) the ontology of the literary work itself, and 2) ways of knowing and describing it. Ryszard Nycz has used the term in the first context.¹⁸⁷ In his understanding, the “weakness” of form of the modern (and especially postmodern) literary work is based on a loosening of its generic markers and, in particular, on a strong intertextualization that serves to weaken the traditional markers of the work itself, such as coherence, wholeness, and completion. Intertextuality takes on particular meaning in this context. On the one hand, it locates the literary work within the space of tradition (contrary to the avant-garde postulate of absolute novelty) and restores a historical dimension. On the other hand, it bases the work-tradition relation not on the classical trope of imitation of a model, but rather on diverse practices of copying, parodying and pastiching – close to the concept of *Verwindung* as understood by Heidegger and Vattimo.

Anna Burzyńska, meanwhile, distinguishes strong theories based on modern epistemology from weak theories, which she claims are closer to pragmatism: “The questioning of epistemological fundamentalism – in this case in literary knowledge the rejection of the parameters of modern theory (universality, objectivity, cognitive neutrality and metalinguistics) – also brought to literary studies very clear pragmatist tendencies and resulted particularly in ‘weak’ theories of reading (the plural here is, of course, not without significance) in the place of the ‘strong’ theory of interpretation. However, this ‘weakness’ clearly did not mean actual weakness, but an entirely conscious acceptance of the minimization of theoretical claims and the shifting of preferences as far as possible for reading practices.”¹⁸⁸

187 Nycz, Ryszard, “Poetyka intertekstualna: tradycje i perspektywy,” *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy*, eds. Michał Paweł Markowski and Ryszard Nycz (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), pp. 172-175.

188 Burzyńska, Anna, *Anty-teoria literatury* (Kraków: Universitas, 2006), p. 453.

These interesting, though rather general comments from two Krakow-based scholars demonstrate, first of all, that the metaphor of weakness is a useful key to understanding the state of contemporary literature and the theory used to describe it. Secondly, the fact that the adjective “weak” preceding the words “form” and “theory” is furnished with quotation marks points to the as yet rather unspecified and open character of the semantic field to which this weakness refers. Above, I have attempted to show in more detail how the concept of weak artistic form can be understood. But what are “weak theory” and “weak poetics”?

An attempt to provide even an introductory or rough definition clearly gives rise to a number of problems, and may, or even must, arouse numerous – probably well-founded – doubts. Firstly, is such a methodological “transfer” from the field of philosophy to that of literary discourse legitimate, and if so, then in what way? Secondly, is it appropriate to refer to weak thought and the solutions it offers in the context of poetics (literary theory, literary sciences etc.)? Can the theoretical premises it has developed prove helpful or functional in attempts to reinterpret fundamental elements of classical poetics? Thirdly – and this problem seems to be the most pressing one – how would this “weakened” interpretation of the categories and concepts of poetics look in practice? And what theoretical status would its “weak” versions attain?

In spite of such serious problems, an attempt to consider the status of poetics and its basic conceptual apparatus in the categories of weak thought might turn out to be interesting and illuminating. Weak thought – particularly in the version presented by Vattimo – makes claims, not without justification, to the role of a kind of *koine* of contemporary thought, which – collecting and, as it were, summarizing the experiences of, among others, modern, post-Heideggerian hermeneutics, deconstruction, and various forms of post-structuralism – paints perhaps the broadest panorama of postmodern, or late-modern culture, and offers a diagnosis of its condition. Meanwhile, the very concept, or metaphor, of weakness is so wide-ranging and flexible that it might be applied to illuminate various fields of experience and to describe various fields and cultural phenomena. Moreover, as I attempted to show earlier, it is precisely art, literature and aesthetic experience that play a significant, or even fundamental role in weak thought.

Weak thought is thought that reveals the current state of philosophy, which has been struck by various crises with the decline of modernity – the crisis of the subject, the crisis of representation, the crisis of philosophy itself as a tool for cognition of the world. In my view, weak poetics might describe literary discourse in the wake of these crises as the classical concept of mimesis, the concept of the authorial, textual subject, the traditional concept of the literary work as a closed form, and, lastly, of theory itself. Weak poetics might also not

merely describe literary discourse, but might also open up new perspectives, and point to possible ways out of these “collapses.” Therefore, it would constitute not just another diagnosis of the state of the crisis – real or supposed – in literary studies, but also a valuable positive proposal, after certain reformulations, reinterpretations, and recontextualizations, preserving the most valuable traditions of poetics (in its various versions and forms), while also opening it up to broader cultural contexts.

Furthermore, we might even go so far as to argue that the need for such a “weak” poetics has become more and more apparent in literary research. The metaphor of “weakness” could serve as a perspective that blends and synthesizes various phenomena – or at least the majority of them – visible in literary studies for some time. In fact, it seems that we can identify two opposing and, at the same time, complementary tendencies in this field.

The first tendency “deabsolutizes” poetics, questions its conceptual neutrality, challenges its claims to objective, transparent description, and reveals it as an institution or practice determined by specific cultural contexts.¹⁸⁹ In this perspective, the emphasis is placed on the various external conditions of poetics – for instance, by showing the “modern” character of the models for research on literature and culture dominant in the twentieth century – and on their connection to the modernist cultural context in its broad scope. The main twentieth-century traditions of methodological literary research – the phenomenological tradition and the formalist-structuralist tradition – are treated as the legacy of the modern Kantian aesthetic, with its postulates of a contemplative and disinterested examination of the work of art, detached from pragmatic, ethical and cognitive functions that are heterogeneous to the domain of aesthetics and the judgment of taste empowered to assess it. The establishment of such a “pure” reception of the work of art or literature is treated as a phenomenon closely connected to cultural modernity and the social and cultural practices characteristic of it.¹⁹⁰

The language of poetics and its conceptual apparatus is thus treated here in similar fashion to metaphysics from the perspective of weak thought – i.e. as a kind of tradition, or heritage. This similarity comes together with all the other consequences resulting from this approach. Poetics is a legacy that is respectable, but also rather awkward, limiting and uncomfortable for literary

189 See: Leitch, Vincent B., *Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism* (New York, 1992), especially the chapter “Pluralizing poetics.”

190 See: Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996); Abrams, M.H., “Art-as-such: the Sociology of Modern Aesthetic”, *Doing Things with Texts. Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (1989).

scholars. Hence the various calls to complement the purely poetological perspective with everything that would not normally be found within it: anthropology, gender studies, ethnicity, ethics, the political context etc.

Whereas the first tendency is reductive in character (meaning directed towards the context), the second tendency postulates the widening of the applicability of poetics and its categories to other areas of culture. The definition of poetics that can perhaps now be acknowledged as its classical interpretation – which states that poetics “examines above all the manner of existence of the literary work as an individual linguistic creation, defined by the ‘demands’ of aesthetic function”¹⁹¹ – is exceeded. This occurs in both aspects of this definition, restricting the application of poetics to: (a) linguistic creations in general, and (b) particular linguistic creations in which the dominant function is aesthetic, or – according to Roman Jakobson’s description – poetic.

The first position is represented by those scholarly attitudes that treat poetics and its categories – hitherto applied above all to the description of literary works – as a universal language of human experience, a way of cognizing, arranging and categorizing cultural reality, including those aspects which are not originally linguistic in nature. Some characteristic examples here might include the categories of narration, mimesis, fiction and genre.

The category of narration, or perhaps the narrational, appears in the works of contemporary philosophers (Ricoeur, McIntyre, Taylor), psychologists (Bruner), sociologists, anthropologists and cultural scholars. Many of these thinkers treat this category as a fundamental and indispensable dimension of human existence – which is constituted in and through the act of telling – and also as an important aspect of the functioning of culture and cultural tradition, which exist in the form of stories both grand or small.

An anthropological interpretation of the category of mimesis can be found, for instance, in the works of René Girard, who – In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* – treats the phenomenon of imitation as the foundation of the mechanism of triangular desire, which is characteristic of the anthropology of the modern human being, and is expressed most fully by the great novelistic traditions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*, mimesis acquires a somewhat different dimension, and is seen as a fundamental aspect of cleansing rituals and the prevention of uncontrolled violence. The original, religious aspects of mimesis, on the other hand, call to mind the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer (“Art and Imitation” from *The Relevance of the Beautiful*) and, more recently in

191 Głowiński, Michał; Okopień-Sławińska, Aleksandra; Sławiński, Janusz, *Zarys teorii literatury* (Warszawa 1986), p. 6.

Poland, Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (*Obraz osobliwy: Hermeneutyczna lektura źródeł etnograficznych*).

Finally, the category of fiction attains an anthropological context in the final works of Wolfgang Iser (*Prospecting: From Reader's Response to Literary Anthropology*, 1989, and especially *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*, 1993). Iser understands literary fiction as a way of reaching everything in human experience that is unconscious, unexpressed, or repressed by those structures and ways of categorizing reality that dominate everyday experience.

Reflections on the category of genre seem to have developed in a similar direction: from being treated as a rigid model or paradigm (Michał Głowiński), to a “loosening” and reduction to the role of hermeneutic horizon for the interpretation of the work (Stanisław Balbus), to the emphasizing of its cultural contexts (Roma Sendyka).¹⁹²

The second position – which extends the categories of poetics to non-literary texts – may be observed through the categories of genre and figurative language. In Bakhtin's essay “The Problem of Speech Genres,” the category of genre is extended and transferred from the sphere of literary utterances to the entire universe of language, while the diversification of speech into genres is explained by reference to the various cultural contexts of different utterances, their multiple functions, various social activities and ideologies. On the other hand, the works of Berel Lang (*Philosophical Style*, 1980, and *Philosophy and the Art of Writing. Studies in Philosophical and Literary Style*, 1983) represent an attempt to apply the category of genre to philosophical works. Lang connects the basic genres of philosophy – dialogue, meditation, treatise and commentary – with various types of authorial point of view and various types of time and space.

In the works of Hayden White on the methodology of historiography (especially *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 1987), a major role is played by an analysis of historiographical discourse according to four fundamental tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. These figures describe the rhetorical and discursive organization of historical texts, and – in connection with various types of plot construction or ways of explaining events, along with their ideological implications – they make it possible to classify the deep structures of historical

192 I have referred to the following texts, respectively: Głowiński, Michał, “Gatunek literacki i problemy poetyki historycznej,” *Powieść młodopolska (Prace wybrane)*, vol. 1, ed. Ryszard Nycz, (Kraków 1997); Balbus, Stanisław, “Zagłada gatunków,” *Teksty Drugie* 1999, no. 6; Sendyka, Roma, “W stronę kulturowej teorii gatunku,” *Kulturowa teoria literatury*, op. cit.

imagination in various periods. An example of the tropological analysis of philosophical discourse is represented by the works of Paul de Man – especially those collected in the volume *Aesthetic Ideology*. De Man analyzes classic European philosophical texts, revealing the rhetorical methods and transformations on which their intellectual constructions are based.

The status of poetics therefore appears to be somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, it is impoverished, so to speak – providing a perspective that is limited, one-sided, too narrow to describe the whole abundance of a literary work in all its complexity and multifaceted nature. On the other hand, it proves to be too broad, rich and flexible to restrict the range of its application exclusively to literary works (in the traditional conception of literature and the literary) – or even to linguistic creations in general. Poetics has been called into question within its own, traditionally assigned field of research, while it has proven to be very productive and effective beyond it – precisely in those places where the defense of the purity and uniqueness of its own subject and methods previously had not permitted it to go. Therefore – to return to the question posed at the beginning of this section – weak poetics might be characterized, first of all, by an identity crisis in the discipline itself. However, this crisis might even be described as positive, since it is based on a constant oscillation – inscribed into its very nature and way of functioning – between the internal and external, between that which is “one’s own” and that which is “other.” Moreover, the crisis is connected with an opening of boundaries to other discourses about culture and with a strong expansion into other fields of research.

Secondly, “weak” poetics might be characterized by the dispelling of various dichotomies in which modern theoretical discourse on literature has been entangled, including the dichotomies of origin and structure, description and interpretation (the perspective of poetics opposed to that of hermeneutics), imitation and deformation in the work, the (closed) work and the (open) text, author/authorship viewed from a biographical perspective and author/authorship seen only as bearer of structure or as a function of the text. Yet the main opposition – rising above all of the specific oppositions mentioned here – would be the opposition of the external and the internal, both in the literary work itself and in the ways in which it can be known and studied. In other words, this opposition is between an immanentist perspective, focused on description of the internal organization of the work, its structures and semiotic order, and a transcendent perspective, interested in the external contexts and conditions for the literary work. The project of “weak” poetics might turn out to be useful in going beyond this dichotomous way of thinking, which is so characteristic of modern discourse on literature and ever more clearly showing its limitations.

However, the perspective I have adopted in this chapter is somewhat different from the one outlined above. Here I understand weak poetics as a “poetics of the trace” and I wish to analyze two questions essential to the discourse of literary studies: the mimetic functions of the work of literature, viewed in broad terms, and the status of the textual subject. I shall attempt to do this by using the concept of the trace, which forms a fundamental part of Vattimo’s concept of weak thought and is also frequently mentioned in various other important modern philosophical traditions. I characterize the mimesis of the trace – in other words, imitation – on the basis of the two traditionally dominant concepts: mimesis as imitation of a model and mimesis as participation in that model. Meanwhile, I show the weak subject against the background of the strong, dialectic subject, capable of full control over its biography, history, and consciousness, as well as in the context of the opposing conception of the death of the subject and the various twentieth-century variations on the crisis of subjectivity.

Imitating as Tracing the World

The Three Forms of Mimesis in Plato’s Philosophy

The Platonic concept of mimesis has been described, commented on and interpreted on numerous occasions and in various ways.¹⁹³ Nevertheless, it appears to contain many aspects that are unclear or difficult to explain fully and unambiguously. I suspect that this is the case for two basic and rather closely related reasons. Firstly, Plato’s thought represents a transitional moment between traditional ways of understanding mimesis – on the one hand, referring to “high” ritual meanings and, on the other, to “low” meanings connected with sleight of hand and mime – and the interpretation of the concept that, broadly speaking, became fixed around the time of Aristotle and has dominated ever since – that is, the aesthetic-poetological understanding.¹⁹⁴ Although the author

193 See: Verdenius, W.J., *Mimesis. Plato’s Doctrine of Artistic Imitation* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1962); Cross, R.C., Wozzley, A.D., *Plato’s Republic. A Philosophical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1964); Gebauer, Gunter and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis. Culture, Art., Society*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Heidegger, Martin, *Nietzsche, Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1991); Lorenc, Iwona, *Świadomość i obraz. Studia z filozofii przedstawienia* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2001); Melberg, Arne, *Theories of Mimesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

194 Tatarkiewicz, Władysław, *Dzieje sześciu pojęć* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe 1976), pp. 312-328.

of *The Sophist* creates and inaugurates this new way of thinking about mimesis, his interpretation sticks strongly to the earlier interpretation, burdened with all the considerable baggage of the old meanings that seem to break through from underneath the new meanings he forges.

Secondly, Plato uses the concept of mimesis in many very diverse contexts, which cannot always be combined or reconciled easily. Platonic ontology, epistemology, psychology, politics and even pedagogy of mimesis all exist. Interestingly, the aesthetic-poetological context plays a relatively modest role here. In fact, as an independent question, it appears only in the *Laws*. In the best-known exposition of mimesis, from Book X of *The Republic*, the dominant context is ontological and political; in the *Sophist* and the *Theaetetus*, it is epistemological; in *Timaeus*, it is cosmological; in the aforementioned *Laws*, it takes aesthetic form in Book II and poetological form in Book III; finally, in *Cratylus*, Plato uses the concept of mimesis and other etymologically related concepts (*mimema*, *mimeomai* etc.) in the context of a discussion on the nature of language. As a result, on each occasion it is not just Plato's appraisal of mimesis that is presented differently – ranging from condemnation in Book X of *The Republic* to a positive assessment in the *Laws*, where imitative dance is treated as a valuable educational method – but also the description of the phenomenon as a whole, as it is conditioned by various contexts. Plato speaks about mimeticism in various languages, describing the phenomenon by means of diverse concepts and categories, with those used most frequently being subjected to subtle shifts in meaning.

First of all, I would like to argue that Plato's writings display not so much a coherent system of well-defined concepts capable of providing a full and adequate description of the concept and phenomenon of mimesis, as a kind of rhetoric of mimesis based on constant movement and shifting of the system of concepts and tropes used to characterize mimeticism. Secondly, I wish to reconstruct what I consider to be the three main models of mimesis in Plato's work, while demonstrating their mutual connections. I shall then use these models – after reinterpreting and adapting them appropriately – to illustrate certain broader and more general problems associated with the phenomenon of mimeticism.

The Republic: The Mimesis of Participation

The concept of mimesis from Book X of Plato's *The Republic* is well known. Therefore, I will present it very briefly, emphasizing those questions that will be important for my later arguments. In the textual commentary tradition, it is often accepted that Plato's line of enquiry is divided into two main parts: while the

first (595a-602b) is rather theoretical in character, concentrating on the ontological and epistemological status of mimesis, the second (602c-608c) is more practical, examining the psychological and ethical aspects of mimeticism and its socio-political effects.¹⁹⁵ From the point of view I have adopted, the first group is more significant.

The interlocutors in Plato's dialogue, Socrates and Glaucon, attempt to investigate the phenomenon of imitation and imitative art. Here it appears that the concept of *poesis mimetike* – usually translated as “poetry that imitates” – should be understood in broader terms. *Poesis* means above all “creating,” “producing,” “doing,” and only later, from around the times of Aristotle's *Poetics*, did it begin to be used in meanings close to those in which it operates today. *Poesis mimetike* might then be translated rather as “imitative creation.” After all, as the numerous examples taken from the fine arts and various crafts indicate, Plato was not only talking about literature, or about verbal art in general, but rather about a certain *social practice* in the broad sense, a certain kind of human activity, burdened by specific ethical and political consequences, and also based on a certain ontology, epistemology and anthropology. Literature and painting are merely particular examples of this practice, which is itself rooted in a certain way of referring to being as a whole.

Plato describes this imitative work or practice by means of three basic oppositions. The first is the opposition of *oneness* and *plurality*. This juxtaposes many material things (*ta polla*) with one figure (*eidos*) and name (*onoma*). We should immediately stress two points here. Firstly, the concept of *eidos* – appearance, shape, figure, model, beauty – operates in Plato's oeuvre in two basic meanings: a “strong,” metaphysical one, and a “weaker,” pragmatic one. In the first, *eidos* means the idea, ideal model, essence, the height of being, strongly contrasted with empirical being and imitation. In the second – as demonstrated by the example of the three beds made by God, a carpenter and a painter – *eidos* is the shape taken by each individual thing and by each of the Platonic levels of being: the ideal model, the material object, and its imitation.¹⁹⁶ Therefore, the sentence “*eidos gar nou ti hen hekaston eiiothamen tithestai peri hekasta tap olla*,” translated as “We usually accept every time one form in connection with numerous objects,” could also be translated as “We give one form to many objects” – here opting for the “strong” and basic meaning of the verb *tithemi* as “put,” “place” etc.

195 Cross, Woosley, pp. 273-274.

196 The concept of *eidos* appears many times in this sense in Aristotle's deliberations on the various relations between nature, *physis*, and art, *techne*; see: *Physics*, 193a.

Secondly, Plato also understands words/names in mimetic-visual terms.¹⁹⁷ He emphasized this fact most clearly in *Cratylus*, where the name is spoken of as an imitation of things analogous to painting (*mimema tou pragmatos* 431), compared with a picture (*eikon*) or even portrait (*dzografema* 431a), and he describes the relationship of both these forms of imitation to reality using the same term – “allocation” (*dianome* 430d). And yet, in *The Republic* itself, he made reference to painting in words and looking through words, as well as through language (*ek ton logon theorousin*).

The second opposition juxtaposes, in general terms, being and appearance. It has several variants which appear in various places within the text and take the form of: (1) the opposition between things that really exist (*onta ge nou te aletheia*) and appearances (*phainomena*); (2) the opposition between those things which are (*oia esti*) and those which appear or “look” (*oia phainetai*) like being, though it seems that the distinction between being and appearing might concern both the very existence of these things and the way in which they exist (this interpretation is strongly suggested by the Polish translation, which distinguishes imitation of things “as they are” and “as they look”); (3) the opposition between “being” (*to on*) and “as if being” (*ti toiouton to on*) (in the Polish translation “that which exists” and “something like that which exists”), though the accumulation of pronouns here (something, that, which) pushes this second element of the opposition into the sphere of indeterminacy.

The third opposition juxtaposes nature and the natural (*physis*) with the artificial – that is, with the work of human hands, the product of the craftsman, who is also described as *demiourgos* as well as *cheirotechnes* (596). This is an interesting and important opposition, perhaps even more important than the other two, though at first glance it may be more difficult to locate in the text, particularly in translation. By studying the example of the concept of nature, we can observe a certain way of constructing philosophical meanings that is characteristic of Plato, who makes use of the semantic energy of language as if he were allowing his thoughts to follow the semantic potential of certain concepts and families of meanings and to develop according to their etymological logic. In the relatively short passage (596a-d) in which Plato develops his concept of three levels of being – the world of ideal forms and models, the world of material things, and the world of appearances, illusions, or imitations – the concept of nature and related concepts appear intensively. Ideal being, which is singular and unified, exists in nature (*te physei ousa*). God created this being naturally – in other words, with the power of nature (*physei*).

197 On this subject, see: Wolicka, Elżbieta, *Mimetyka i mitologia Platona* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1994), pp. 26-38.

The act of creation is sometimes described using common words that denote means of creation also characteristic of both the craftsman-creator of material things and the imitator-creator of illusion (*poein, ergadzomai*). However, two concepts related to the concept of *physis* – *phyteo* and *phyo* – are reserved exclusively for the creation of being. *Phyteo* means to plant, graft, produce, give birth to, while *phyo* has a similar meaning – to produce, give birth to, sprout, cause growth. Both verbs, then, reveal a strong relation to organic metaphors, much like the noun *phytourgos*, which refers to God as the creator of ideal being and means “gardener,” someone who cares for plants, “parent,” “father,” and only then “creator” in general. In the Polish translation, many of these semantic strands are inevitably lost, as *phutourgos* is translated as a “creator of nature,” *phyteo* as “creation from the nature of things,” while the untranslatable etymological construction *physei ephusen* is given as “creation of a nature,” meaning creation of an individual being or thing.

Therefore, the Platonic concept of nature seems to be rather far removed from the abstract terms of “essence” or “being.” Instead, it maintains a close connection with concepts of the organic, birth, growth, full strength, life existing on the strength of its own being, fully developed, not requiring any supplement or complement, perfect, complete, and self-identical.¹⁹⁸ One might say, at the risk of blasphemy, that the world of things existing naturally, or from nature, is born, and not created. It would seem that the concept of nature is also close to the concept of truth, though not treated in terms of correspondence, but rather as original self-presence. Plato himself seems to emphasize this connection when he describes – in consecutive statements from Socrates – the products of imitation as a third alternative to truth (*ano tes aletheias*) and nature, or *physis* (*ano tes physeos*) (597 C).

Aristotle presented the concept of nature quite differently; for him, it has three basic meanings. Firstly, nature is understood as being that is fully shaped and formed, as shape and form, as *eidos* – in a meaning close to the second Platonic meaning mentioned above – and as *morfe*. Secondly, nature is understood as a shapeless and amorphous original matter (*hyle*), as substrate (*hypokeimon*), as primeval element.¹⁹⁹ Thirdly, Aristotle conceives the natural as

198 Heidegger pointed to these contexts of the notion of *physis* in Aristotle in his essay “On The Essence and Concept of Φύσις”, published in English in *Pathmarks*, trans. Thomas Sheehan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also, in a particularly important context here, the comments from Heidegger’s *Nietzsche*. Stróżewski (p. 174) notes that *to on*, being, is grammatically a participle, and therefore, contrary to scholastic tradition, does not express essential being. It is worth noting Heidegger’s remark – from the essay cited above – that the meaning of participle forms in philosophical Greek is not yet known.

199 Aristotle, *Physics*, 193a-b.

deriving from both matter and form, as something that contains within itself the principle of its own emergence and existence – for it is this characteristic that distinguishes natural things from the products of art (*techne*), the principle of whose emergence and movement exists externally – though still as something that has not yet attained form and shape.²⁰⁰ These three different ways of understanding the concept of nature also lead to three different ways of understanding the nature-art relationship, and three different ways of understanding the concept of imitation. In the first understanding of nature, it is treated as a primeval element preceding art (*techne*), whose task is simply to imitate nature – both in the sense of *mimēomai*, as in Aristotle’s *Meteorology*, for example, and in that of *akoloutheo*, meaning to follow someone or something, to accompany, to result from something. This meaning refers to the imitation of nature as a perfect, unattainable model, e.g. in the treatise *On the Heavens*.²⁰¹

According to the second way of understanding the concept of nature, *techne* is treated as the idea (*logos*) of a work existing without matter, which it logically precedes, like an intentional cause, or constructive, shaping element. In this sense, one can say it is rather nature that imitates art, since – as Aristotle says – random creations, formed spontaneously, arise in a similar way to works of art – that is, intentionally.²⁰² Finally, the third understanding of the concept of nature makes it possible to understand claims from *Physics* and *Invitation to Philosophy* stating that art partly imitates and partly complements that which nature cannot realize. Nature, though it already has some shape and order, is marked by a certain weakness or powerlessness (*adynatei*), whereas the task of art is to complement (*epitelei*) its activity, bringing nature to a state of full development and fulfillment of its immanent functionality (*telos*).²⁰³

This view of nature and what is natural, in the understanding presented here, marks to a considerable degree the limits within which Plato would think about the phenomenon of mimesis. An initial definition of this concept – at least in the terms of *The Republic* – might take the following form: mimesis means creation or production of un-natural things, in all the meanings and aspects outlined above, which, by “impersonating” *physis*, conceal its presence, rendering its full manifestation impossible. It is this aspect of mimeticism, expressed by the

200 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1015a.

201 Aristotle, *Meteorology* 361e; *On the Heavens* 268a.

202 Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 640a.

203 Aristotle, *Invitation to Philosophy*, frag. 13. On the subject of nature in Aristotle, see in particular Heidegger, Martin, “On The Essence and Concept of Φύσις.” Concentrating only on *Physics*, Heidegger ignores Aristotle’s statements accentuating the incompleteness and imperfection of nature.

natural-unnatural opposition, which seems to be the fundamental aspect, logically prior in its relations to the other characteristics. Mimesis in *The Republic* has little in common with the creation of artistic representation or images of reality treated as a copy or imitation of nature. Instead, it represents above all the creation of a second nature, a duplicate, an unauthentic substitute of the authentic *physis*. The imitator “can not only make all implements, but also creates everything that grows from the earth [*ta ek tes ges fuomena*] and makes all living beings” (596C), says Socrates, and this statement should be taken literally. Plato does not distinguish clearly here between the creations of nature and those of the human hand; this division – into natural and artificial things, *ta physika* and *ta technika* – is made, in a strong way, only by Aristotle in *Physics*, where he encloses mimesis within the safe and well defined borders of *techné* and artistic creation. For Plato, however, mimesis would be an action close to that of the mime, conjuror, magician, illusionist (*thaumatopoiia*, *skiagrafia* 602d), while in the concept of *mimetes*, imitator, he hears those meanings which refer to the swindler, charlatan, *goes*, to whom in fact he directly compares the imitator, rather than those which refer to the artist. The imitator is also described in *The Republic* as a “terribly clever fellow” – *deinos aner* – which to be precise means both adept (inspiring admiration) and terrible (inspiring fear). This ambiguity renders Plato’s relationship to mimesis well. Imitative art, after all, involves the devious and ethically suspect gesture – however adept – of the switch or substitution of the original with a fake. To take one of Socrates’ examples, it means the substitution of a real carpenter with a painted carpenter, who, seen from a distance, looks like a real one.

Imitative creations – *mimemata* – are then an appearance and illusion, or even a non-being, since they do not fit the order of nature as original self-presence that is complete, full, and eternal – the only area of being meriting the predicate “to exist.” They are also numerous and various, since they do not fit the order of nature as unity and identity from which all difference is eliminated. The truly existing object does not differ from itself. Apparent difference is introduced only by its appearances, and – after them – by imitations. In Book III of *The Republic*, Plato therefore deems mimesis – albeit understood somewhat differently – as a threat to the identity of the subject, since imitation of many things or people causes human nature (*he tou anthropou physis*) to transform into tiny fragments (395b).²⁰⁴

204 The connection of mimesis and aesthetic illusion with the negation of identity both in Plato and in later tradition is stressed by Vattimo in his essay “Arte e identità. Sull’attualità dell’estetica di Nietzsche,” *Dialogo con Nietzsche*.

Eidola or *phantasmata* – the concepts that Plato most often uses to describe imitative creations – are therefore not so much images, meaning mental or artistic depictions of some previously existing reality, as representations, meaning what replaces, or tries to replace a previously existing presence. Plato uncovers the ontological status of this being, calling it inferior (*phaulon*) – “mimetic art, then, is an inferior thing cohabiting with an inferior and engendering inferior offspring” (603b) – and weak in relation to what truly exists. The Greek phrase *amydron ti tynchanei on pros aletheian* can also be understood in this way – rendered in Witwicki’s Polish translation as “unclear in relation to the truth” (597a).²⁰⁵ It appears that Plato’s intention is not so much to claim that imitations reproduce the truth unclearly, dimly, and imprecisely, but rather to assert that their ontological status is low, mediocre, worse than that which truly exists. The device of the mirror (596d) should also be interpreted in this context. The mirror reflection interests Plato not as an image, depiction, copy of reality, but above all as a kind of duplicate, which is inferior because it is produced carelessly, hurriedly (*tachy*), in various ways and everywhere (*pollache; pantache*) – in other words, in violation of the principle of identity and unity of the object, as well as of the knowledge concerning its production.

The relation of imitative creations to originals is not viewed in categories of similarity/dissimilarity, suitability/unsuitability, concordance/discordance – that is, in those categories ultimately referring to a correspondence understanding of truth. Instead, it is viewed in terms of a participation or non-participation in the order of truth, presence, *physis*, and of that which exists in a true way.²⁰⁶ It is also in this context that we should interpret claims that imitations stand far removed from truth (*porro ara nou tou alethous he mimetike esti* 598c), do not reach the truth (*tes aletheias oukh aptesthai* 600d), or reach and touch it only to a small degree (*smikron ti hekastou ephaptetai* 598b). Book X of *The Republic* is essentially an ontology of mimesis. Plato asks specifically about the existential status of imitative creations, while the other levels of his multifaceted

205 See also Heidegger’s interpretation of this concept in *Nietzsche*, pp. 203-204.

206 This is expressed extremely well by Heidegger (op. cit. p. 210), who writes: “What is decisive for the Greek-Platonic concept of *mimesis* or imitation is not reproduction or portraiture, not the fact that the painter provides us with the same thing again; what is decisive is the fact that this is precisely what he cannot do, that he is even less capable than the craftsman of duplicating the same thing. It is therefore wrongheaded to apply to *mimesis* notions of “naturalistic” or “primitivistic” copying and reproducing. Imitation is subordinate pro-duction. The mimesis is in its essence defined by the position of distance, which results from the hierarchy established with regard to ways of production and in the light of pure ‘outward appearance.’”

critique of mimeticism – epistemological, ethical, practical, psychological, political – are a consequence of his ontological conclusions.

The Sophist: The Mimesis of Similarity

Plato's reflections on mimesis from Book X of *The Republic* are worth comparing with the sections devoted to this phenomenon in the *Sophist* (232-241) – a dialogue which features relatively rarely in interpretations of the Platonic theory of mimeticism.²⁰⁷ Alongside elements generally concurring with the view set out in *The Republic*, an entirely different way of understanding mimetic art also appears here. Moreover, in the *Sophist* certain paradoxes associated with the concept of mimesis are much more clearly expressed. These contradictions also crop up in *The Republic*, but they are overshadowed, so to speak, by other issues.

In the extract in question, Theaetetus and the Stranger attempt to investigate the essence of the art of sophistry and to distinguish it from true knowledge. The opening (233d-235b) description of the sophist and his art are very much reminiscent of the description of the imitator from *The Republic*, though in the *Sophist* the epistemological context and the knowledge/non-knowledge opposition are in the foreground. Imitative art is essentially non-knowledge (*anepistemozyne* 589b), since it does not possess its own scope or object, but merely counterfeits authentic skills or crafts. The art of sophistry is the skill of prompting opinions (*doksastike* 233c) without knowing the truth. Imitators simply pretend to know all crafts (598e) and are able, by making use of imitative art, to make everything (*panta apergadzetai* 598b) that is the object of the separate crafts. The sophist, on the other hand, thinks that he can hold forth about everything – and even make and do all things – through the use of just one skill (*poiein kai dran mia techne symmpanta epistasthai pragmata* 233d). Like the imitator, the sophist is compared with the sorcerer (*goes* 235) or conjuror (*thaumatopoiios* 235b), who can “by magic” conjure up the illusion of reality before members of his audience and convince them that they are looking at true things. In fact, they are looking at mere “fakes,” executed quickly, like the mirror image from *The Republic* – cheap substitutes for what really exists (233e).

Plato also likens the imitative and sophist arts to a joke, or something frivolous and childish (*paidia*, 602b, 234b). Just as the poet-imitator spreads the dangerous charm of his poetry by painting in words (*onomasi kai rhemasi epichromatidzein* 601a), so too the sophist casts a spell with words (*tois logois*

207 This is mentioned by Gebauer and Wulf, pp. 40-41.

goeteuien), creating verbal images of all things (*eidola legomena peri panton* 234c). This motif of illusion has yet another variant, connected with painting. Both *The Republic* (598c) and *The Sophist* (234b) include the motif of “placing” or showing images in the distance that, through ignorance, are taken for truly existing things: in the former, pictures and apparitions (*eidola*), and in the latter, imitations and likenesses (*mimemata kai homonyma*). Here, Plato uses both the literal and metaphorical senses of the expression “being (standing) far from the truth” or “from true things” (*porro ton pragmaton tes aletheias*). In *The Republic*, this expression describes the apparent being of imitative creations cut off from *physis* as origin of being, while in the *Sophist* it is a model for cognitive error. Interestingly, Plato refers here not to theoretical cognition, but to practical wisdom, since this illusion can arise only in the minds of young and inexperienced people. Suffering and life experience allow one to encounter reality (*ephaptesthai ton onton*; the same verb, but in the negative form, appeared in *The Republic* to denote the relation of imitative creations to originals) and break with false beliefs. Furthermore, he reverses entirely here his own argument from *The Republic*, where it is suffering and misfortune – as well as their imitation in tragic works – that leads to confusion of the soul, and to an inability to see things clearly in accordance with their actual measure or to distinguish truth from falsehood, good from evil (604b).

Sophism is therefore essentially equated with imitative art (mimeticism) and, from here on, the conversation of Theaetetus and the Stranger will be concerned with precisely this point. However, the unity of the idea is only apparent. Although Plato uses certain terms from *The Republic*, he gives them rather different meanings suited to the different context. Moreover, he partly creates an entirely new language for describing the phenomenon of mimesis, in which a fundamental role will be played by a concept of similarity – and various etymological variations of it – which does not appear in *The Republic*.

The Stranger begins his reflections by trying to grasp what the art of creating images is about (*eidolopoiike techne* 235c). The concept of the picture, or *eidolon*, contained in this term – which also appears in other parts of this passage of dialogue – has a largely descriptive and neutral character, apparently functioning without the baggage of the negative connotations it carried in *The Republic*. The text does not make clear whether *eidolopoiike techne* is identical to *mimetike techne*, but it seems that, in general terms, they can be equated. The art of imitation is divided into two parts: the ability to make likenesses (*eikastike*

techne) and the ability to create deceptive appearances (*phantastike techne*).²⁰⁸ The Stranger's description of these strongly contrasting abilities is rather brief and superficial. However, it does become clear that the relationship between the model, or pattern – referred to by the term *paradeigma*, which does not appear in *The Republic* – and the reproduction of this model is portrayed quite differently here than in *The Republic*. Plato is not interested in the ontological status of the model – whether it has a transcendent or empirical character. Nor is he concerned with its imitation – in other words, with its lesser or greater “saturation” with a sense of being, its level of participation in the order of *physis*. At the center of his interest is the relation of similarity or dissimilarity linking the imitation with the original, which will also become the basis for a positive or negative assessment of the former. As was the case with the concept of *physis* and other semantically related concepts, here too Plato makes use of a whole family of meanings: *eikos* (that which is similar), *eikon* (likeness or image), *eoikein* (to be similar), *eikastos* (similar), *eikastikos* (presenting), and *eikastike techne* (the art of presenting), as well as etymological constructions which are hard to translate, such as *eikos eoikenai* (to seem similar).

Eikastike techne is when the creator of a *mimema* – an imitative creation, image, or artistic reproduction – faithfully preserves the proportions of the model (*kata tous paradeigmatos symmetrias*) in length, width and depth, adding color to each part as appropriate. Such an imitation, which preserves the character of likeness (*eikos*) to the model, is referred to using the ambiguous term *eikon*, which may be translated as “image,” “portrait,” “likeness,” or “picture” – bearing positive connotations. Its opposite is the negatively evaluated concept *fantazma*, or deceptive appearance, which is created by the *fantastike techne*. This concept is known from *The Republic*, where – translated as “apparition” – it describes the deceptive being of those creations found furthest in the ontological hierarchy from *physis* and *aletheia*. In the *Sophist*, the concept changes its meaning together with a change in the whole paradigm of Platonic thinking about mimeticism, coming to mean a reproduction that is imprecise, unfaithful and divergent from the model, since it does not preserve the true, existing proportions (*ousas*) but those which only seem (*doksousas*), or appear (*phainetai*) to be beautiful, but in fact are not.

The question of the trueness of an imitation is also understood differently in the *Sophist*. Plato does not actually equate similarity and reproduction of the similar with truth – and deceptive appearance with untruth. In fact, he uses the

208 On this division cf. Klein, Jacob, *Plato's Trilogy: Theaetetus, the Politician and the Statesman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 32; Cornford, op. cit. pp. 195-199.

opposition of truth (and rightness) and falsehood directly only in *Cratylus* (430d) in the context of reflections on the mimetic fitting of the figuratively understood name to the thing. However, the expression “not to care for the truth” (*ou chairein to alethes easantes hoi demiourgoi*) used in reference to the creators of deceptive appearances seems to suggest that the *eikon-fantasma* opposition refers to concepts of truth and falsehood. However, in this case, truth is understood not in participatory terms, as in *The Republic*, but – as the context of the whole dialogue shows – in terms of correspondence, as the accordance of representation/judgment with that which is presented/being.

In the *Sophist*, the concept – and relation – of likeness is described in rather general and vague terms, much like the participatory “touching” or “holding” the truth discussed in *The Republic*. In Book II of the *Laws* (667d-669), we can find a somewhat more precise description of this mimesis of likeness, enriched by new ideas and oppositions. The connection of likeness and imitation in general with the concept of beauty and the aesthetic sphere is also clearly emphasized – a connection that is only marked in the *Sophist* and is entirely lacking in *The Republic*. A novelty introduced by the *Laws* to the description of mimesis is the question of pleasure (*hedone*). In both *The Republic* and the *Sophist*, the main opposition in which the concept of imitation operates – though it is differently articulated in each – is that of truth and illusion (*fainomenon*). The cited passage from the *Laws* begins with the claim that producing likenesses (*ton homoion ergasia*) by imitative arts (*technai eikastikai*) brings pleasure and grace (*charis*), which are ethically neutral, do not cause damage, but also do not bring any benefit, likeness (*homoiototes*) or truth.

In the opposition between pleasure and grace on the one side, and truth and likeness on the other, the latter elements are judged positively. The rightness or correctness (*orthotes*) of imitation is decided by likeness and equivalence (*isotes*). This is a very important step in Plato’s reasoning. Like in the *Sophist*, and unlike in *The Republic*, where a participatory understanding of truth results in a negative assessment of mimesis, which is shifted to the sphere of illusion, truth is understood (in the cited passage from the *Laws*) in correspondence terms. This relation then constitutes the foundation for a division into “good” mimesis – i.e. that “in which there is likeness to the beauty of the reproduced original” (*ekeinen ten echousan ten homoioteta to tou kalou mimemati* 667e), as the famous definition given by the Stranger of Athens has it – and “bad” mimesis, i.e. that which does not fulfill the above condition.

Essential, immanent aesthetic values and the beauty of the reproduction are contrasted with grace or beauty, which have a secondary or derivative character, arising as a result of the likeness, or even equivalence, of the reproduction and the original. In the *Laws*, Plato gives a classic definition of imitation, and at the

same time a classic definition of beauty. A reproduction should reproduce the being or substance of the imitated thing and its characteristics, though particular emphasis is placed on structural characteristics and those connected with the spatial and compositional layout, such as the dimensions of the object, the proportion of the parts to the whole and the arrangement of the former (*meron tas theseis*), their correct number and, finally, the appropriate composition of the whole (*prosekousa taksis*).

The issues addressed by the *Sophist* are not, however, limited to a straightforward outline of the opposition between likeness and deceptive appearance, or “good” and “bad” imitation. In fact, their relations are shown in a much richer and more complex manner. After discussing non-being and the contradictions into which a person may fall when he says that he exists and can be known – in which an important role is played by “mimetic” examples such as reflections in water and mirrors, as well as painted likenesses – the Stranger and Theaetetus again return to the question of the image and its nature. Their conversation – an exchange of short but cogent retorts in which every word is important – is somewhat reminiscent of a dramatic stichomythia:

Theaetetus: Why, Stranger, what can we say an image is, except another such thing fashioned in the likeness of the true one?

Stranger: Do you mean another such true one, or in what sense did you say “such”?

Theaetetus: Not a true one by any means, but only one like the true.

Stranger: And by the true you mean that which really is?

Theaetetus: Exactly.

Stranger: And the not true is the opposite of the true?

Theaetetus: Of course.

Stranger: That which is like, then, you say does not really exist, if you say it is not true.

Theaetetus: But it does exist, in a way.

Stranger: But not truly, you mean.

Theaetetus: No, except that it is really a likeness.

Stranger: Then what we call a likeness, though not really existing, really does exist?

Theaetetus: Not-being does seem to have got into some such entanglement with being, and it is very absurd. (*The Sophist*, 240 a-c)

I view the last sentence as the key to the whole argument of this passage of the dialogue, as well as to my own. Therefore, I would like to try to present my own translation of Theaetetus’ words and to briefly interpret them. In the original, they go as follows: “*Kindyneuei toiauten tina peplechthai symploken to me on to*

onti, kai mala atopon". This might be alternatively translated as: "Perhaps some tangle of being has become entangled with non-being, it is very paradoxical."²⁰⁹ Plato's next etymological figure – *peplechthai symploke* – combines the verb *pleko*, which means plait, weave, tangle, plot, or think up, and the noun *symploke*, translated as "absurd entanglement." *Symploke* also alludes to such meanings as knot, combination, interweaving, but in contexts that are not always easy to reconcile, since they are both agonistic (including struggle, wrestling, and clash) and erotic (including amorous embraces and intertwining).

This tangle, or *symploke*, can be treated as a textual motif, a kind of passing description serving to identify the uncomfortable situation in which the protagonists of the dialogue, who are attempting to grasp the essence of likeness, have found themselves. However, it can also be interpreted as a rhetorical figure, with its basic meaning largely a combination of anaphor and epiphor, or of various figures or styles in general. I would like here to propose a somewhat broader understanding of *symploke* as a figure of thought – by interpreting it as an irresolvable tangle of various intellectual and discursive orders. This tangle simultaneously builds and shatters the Platonic conception of mimesis, revealing it as an unending movement of tropes and concepts, and disclosing its ultimately rhetorical basis. *Symploke* understood in this manner would operate in several contexts and on several levels.

The first of these – the main one – is the aforementioned tangle of being and non-being, which constitutes the paradoxical essence of the imitative picture (*eikon*). The analysis of this problem presented in the *Sophist* is richer and more interesting than in *The Republic*, where imitations are unambiguously consigned to the sphere of illusion and non-being. That which is similar to truth is not truth itself. Therefore, it does not exist at all, since only that which is true is entitled to full, authentic existence. Yet a likeness is entitled to a certain peculiar degree of "beingness" – its paradoxical essence or *modus existendi* is to be a picture, a likeness, which, in spite of being non-existence, still exists in some way. Plato

209 Among the authors who have written about the question of being and non-being in the *Sophist* are Cornford, pp. 209-212; Stróżewski, Władysław, *Wykłady o Platonie* (Kraków: Wyd. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 1992), pp. 170-183; Klein, Jacob, pp. 32-36; Przełęcki, Marian, *Lektury Platoniczne* (Warszawa: Wydział Filozofii i Socjologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2000), pp. 19-27. The last of these articles analyzes the paradoxes shown by Plato in reference to the language of logical semantics. The philosophical analyses of this problem with which I am familiar – with the exception of Stróżewski's work – connect the question of being and non-being with the status of the image and issues of mimeticism only to a small extent. On the other hand, Gebauer and Wulf, in their discussion of mimesis in the *Sophist*, meticulously avoid philosophical questions.

solves this tangle by building the classical definition of truth: it is false to claim that something that does not exist exists, and that something that exists does not exist. Yet the consequences of *symploke* for his conception of mimesis turn out to be more serious and more difficult to control. After all, it is obvious that if we define similarity (*eoikos*) and likeness (*eikon*) as the opposite of truth, then the opposition outlined earlier of a “good,” similar, and therefore true image and a deceptive, untrue appearance (*eikon-fantazma*) – “good” and “bad” mimesis – is radically undermined, since it would be hard in this case to define what the difference between them would be.

Eikon as likeness is therefore on the side of both truth and falsehood: “the image exists, but somehow it also does not exist”.²¹⁰ This tangle – of which we might assume Plato was not entirely aware – is a tangle of two Platonic languages of mimeticism. The first of these is the ontological language of Book X of *The Republic* and the participatory theory of truth, according to which mimesis was dangerous trickery “substituting” the order of *physis* with its duplicate. The second one is the epistemological language of the *Sophist*, which is based on the correspondence theory of truth, according to which mimesis as *eikastike technē* means reliable imitation, reproduction of the original. Plato speaks in two languages at the same time here, and this is the root of the semantic shifts in the concepts employed, which – though hard to discern – are crucial, as they undermine the argument constructed.²¹¹ However, the consequences of this problem go deeper, beyond just Plato’s concept of mimesis. They reveal the deep paradox that Plato apparently unwittingly opened up and, to a great extent, passed on to later concepts of mimeticism: the “better” the picture in the categories of the mimesis of similarity – i.e. the more similar to the original – the “worse” it is in the categories of the mimesis of participation, since it more clearly shows its duplicate nature, which in the best case is unnecessary, and in the worst case may pose a threat to the order of nature, truth, ethics and politics.²¹²

The concept of mimesis and mimetic images used by Plato to make distinctions fundamental for philosophical thought – to divide truth from falsehood, being from non-being – turn out therefore to be truly dangerous contraband, poison to the philosopher’s whole discourse, since they undermine strongly drawn oppositions and expose alarming places of “entanglement,” “in-between” or indeterminate areas that do not succumb easily to dichotomous

210 See: Stróżewski, op. cit. p. 184. See also the remarks, important for my analysis, on likeness as weaker being and its complicated ontological status, p. 179.

211 Stróżewski points to the duality of Plato’s expression, based on transition from the ontological to the epistemological plane, op. cit. p. 171.

212 This paradox is framed differently by Lorenc, op. cit. p. 30.

orders based on an unambiguous system of concepts and judgments. If we accept this tangle-*symploke* in all its rhetorical and philosophical potential, we are also forced to accept the two irreconcilable interpretations of it: on the one hand, as *agon*, conflict, struggle, assuming strong dichotomization, hierarchization and, ultimately, the victory of one of the antagonistic principles, and, on the other hand – even more disturbing in the context of Plato’s reflections – as amorous embrace, peaceful reconciliation and equal status.

The Theaetetus: *The Mimesis of the Trace*

Such a strong division between the two Platonic models of mimeticism – the mimesis of participation and the mimesis of similarity – may seem to be an arbitrary procedure. In interpretive tradition, it is more common to treat Plato’s concept of mimesis in the categories of copy and imitation, mirror image, creation of pictures and likenesses, which forget or push onto the sidelines what I believe are important participational ideas, which are traces of older ways of understanding mimeticism.²¹³ It is true that a moment of similarity does occur in the relationship of imitation to original, *eidolon* to *eidos*, but it is secondary to the moment of participation, and not the same as a “portrait” likeness or imitation. Both the philological and philosophical arguments allow us to look beneath the apparent unity of the concept of mimesis, and to glimpse various phenomena which, even if they overlap or merge together, are not identical. The model presented in Book X of *The Republic* is closer to the source meanings of mimesis as trickery, “counterfeiting” nature, whereas the one presented in the *Sophist* rather heralds an understanding of mimeticism closer to modern theories of imitation. The translation of the Greek concept of mimesis into the Latin concept of *imitatio* and its modern derivatives is therefore a moment not of continuation, but of breaking with a certain tradition, a “threshold,” at which these original contexts of mimeticism still appearing in Plato begin to disappear. It is not the *mimetike techne* from *The Republic*, but rather the *eikastike techne* from the *Sophist* that could be translated as “imitation.” Evidence for this supplanting of the mimesis of participation by the mimesis of similarity might be offered by Proclus’s commentary on Plato’s *The Republic*, entitled *Eis ten politeian Platonos*. Discussing the conception of mimesis and the theory of the three levels of being, Proclus does not use the concept from Book X of *The Republic*, but rather the one from the *Sophist*. He describes the imitation of

213 Hans-Georg Gadamer discusses this in his essay “Art and Imitation,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 138-139. Gebauer and Wulf mention the participational aspects of Platonic mimesis, albeit in marginal terms.

natural beings (*ta physika*), including humans, with the word *eikon*, likeness, while he describes the imitation of artificial beings or things (*ta techneta*) with the word *eikos* – meaning “likely” – and their relationship to originals as similarity (*homoioia*).²¹⁴

However, I would argue that we can also find in Plato the basis for a different understanding of imitation: one based neither on the conception of pictorial representations, nor on copies and duplicates, nor entangled in the aporias resulting from acceptance of the vision of a world ruled by strong oppositions, whether of full presence or being and illusion or non-being, or of faithful imitation or similarity and the deceptive image or dissimilarity. The reflections on memory in the *Theaetetus* (passage 191d-193d) do not immediately appear to have much in common with problems of mimeticism, since they concern the possibility of true and false judgment arising in the mind, i.e. questions close to those considered by Plato in the *Sophist*. Yet the process of remembering, as described by Socrates, resembles the process of mimetic images – compared with wax blocks of better or worse quality (*ekmageion*) – arising in the soul. Furthermore, the passage in question begins with an invocation to Mnemosyne, the mother of the Muses, whose gift is precisely this wax block: the connection between memory and poetic creativity in Antiquity was very strong and multifaceted.²¹⁵

A fundamental role in the conception of memory and remembering is played by the concept of the trace, which appears in the above-mentioned passage from the *Theaetetus* in three variations that are close to each other in certain respects, though not the same: *typos*, or trace as imprint; *semeion*, or trace as sign; and *ichnos*, or trace as track or remnant.²¹⁶ The process of remembering consists of sensory impressions and thoughts being imprinted and then persisting in the form of trace-imprints, much like the imprints of seals (*sfragida*). Forgetting

214 Proclus, *Commentatorium in Rempublicam Platonis. Partes ineditae* (Berolini, 1886), p. 47.

215 See: Komornicka, Anna M., *Poezja starożytnej Grecji. Wybrane gatunki* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1974).

216 It seems that Plato does not distinguish between these three difference concepts consistently when referring to the trace, essentially using them in similar contexts. The translator of the *Theaetetus* into Polish, for example, also did not maintain any consistency in translating such notions as sign, trace, remnant etc. In fragment 191, for example, Witwicki uses “trace” in a place where Plato is speaking of an image (*eidolon*). „To, co się w niej [duszy] odbija, pamiętamy to i wiemy, jak długo trwa jego ślad w materiale”. *Semeion*, meanwhile, is translated once as *wycisk* [impression] (191 D), and elsewhere (193 C) as *odbicie* [imprint], and then again as *ślad* [trace], and finally (194 B) as *znak* [sign]. These difficulties show that the question of the trace, from both a philological and a philosophical point of view, is difficult to grasp unambiguously.

consists of these traces vanishing or being erased. Plato uses three different verbs here to refer to the concept of imitating, though not in the generally accepted meaning of copying or mimicking, but rather as imprinting or leaving a trace: the verb *anotypoo*, deriving from the noun *typos* (meaning to print, to impress a seal, reflect and copy); the verb *ekmatto* (meaning to emboss, leave traces, but also, interestingly, to blur or smudge, and to copy); and the verb *ensemaino* (meaning to be imprinted, to engrave or to mark).

However, Socrates equates the emergence of true judgment and knowledge with recognition (*anagnorisis*), which is described as the matching (*prosarmosai*) of a new sensual impression or appearance (*opsis*) with a trace already existing in the memory, here called *semeion* and *ichnos*. According to Francis Cornford,²¹⁷ Plato is referring here to the passage from Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*, in which Electra recognizes Orestes matching his own footprints to the footprints left by his brother: "And look! Another proof! Footprints matching each other – and like my own! Yes, here are the outlines of two sets of feet, his own and some companion's. The heels and the imprints of the tendons agree in proportion with my own tracks. I am in torment, my brain is in a whirl!"²¹⁸

The order of the trace is not identical either ontologically or epistemologically with either the order of re-presentation (the doubling of presence) or the order of representation. The ontological status of the trace leads neither to "strong" being, "*ontos on*," full presence or self-presence, understood as *physis* or *aletheia*, nor to the "weak" duplicate, apparition or illusion. A trace is always the trace of something, left by something or someone who was present in both the spatial and the temporal sense. In this way, it is therefore not an entirely independent or self-contained being – that is, existing on the power of its own being. As a *typos*, or imprint, a trace is a record of contact with that which is real, a kind of "seal" both imprinting itself on reality and embossed by that reality. As *ichnos*, track and remnant, it is something that is left behind after that reality or presence, its encrypted, "track-like" way of manifesting itself. Finally, as *semeion*, or sign, it is entangled in semiotic and semantic relations, signifying and referring to reality.²¹⁹ However, at the same time, the trace exists in reality. It is a material, non-transparent and resistant being, remaining and stubbornly living on, preserved in its existence by the very power of its character as remnant and physical pressure. These qualities also mean that the trace is not

217 Cornford, Francis M., *Plato's Theory of Knowledge: The Theaetetus and the Sophist* (London: Routledge, 1935), p. 124.

218 Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers*, trans. H.W. Smyth, <http://www.theoi.com/Text/AeschylusLibation.html> (access 31.10.2012).

219 On the various notions of *semeion* in Plato cf. Wolicka, op. cit. p. 34.

just some inferior, secondary version of the authentic, truly existing original. It cannot, then, be treated either as an illusion, apparition, or frail shadow of true being, nor as a simple “double,” copy, or “counterfeit” that merely pretends to be true being.

The temporal structure of the trace presents itself in a similar manner. It has a dual character: on the one hand, an imprint or remnant is always anachronous, appearing only “after” that which was, has happened and is gone, and refers to the past, meaning to that which is no longer present. On the other hand, they have their own present and are present in the here and now, though this presence and present are, as it were, determined and made possible by the being-past of that which has gone.

The order of the trace is also not equated with the order of representation. A trace is not a pictorial representation of reality or the part of it that arises in the consciousness. An imprint, or *typos*, is shown in the *Theaetetus* as prior to the image, or *eikon*. For an image of a thing to arise, it must first have imprinted its material trace on the soul – the wax block. According to Paul Ricoeur, “the alleged conjunction of *eikon* and imprint is thus held to be more originary than the relation of resemblance that sets the mimetic art into play. In other words, there can be a truthful or deceitful mimetic because, between the *eikon* and the imprint, there is a dialectic of accommodation, harmonization, or adjustment that can succeed or fail.”²²⁰ A trace is also not equated with the opposite of similarity – with deceptive appearance. The question of the trace as a way for reality to manifest itself in the soul or consciousness – as the relationship between the “I” and the world – is not characterized by correspondence, adequacy, or the matching of the presentation with that which is presented. Instead, it is a physical collision that leaves behind a “remnant” – a material imprint.²²¹

Also in the concept of *semeion* – the trace as sign – we can detect semantic layers referring to imprinting and leaving a trace, suggesting that the relation of the meaning is secondary to them. If, in Heraclitus’s famous sentence “The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but gives a sign,”²²² the verb “to give a sign” (*semainei*) is translated as “leave a trace” – for which I believe there are philological grounds – then we can observe that the question of the trace goes beyond oppositions of concealing and not concealing, revealing and hiding, and refuses to locate itself at either extreme of this dichotomy.

220 See: Ricoeur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), p. 13. Also see: Cornford’s analysis, *op. cit.* pp. 120-127.

221 In *Timaeus* (67b), Plato refers clearly to auditory sensations as blows (*plege*).

222 Quoted in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/heraclit/> (access: 31.10.2012).

Similar conclusions on the dual or indirect nature of the trace also follow from the aforementioned ambivalence in the word *ekmatto*. Since the trace and tracing assume both the gesture of wiping away (or erasure) and of leaving an imprint – interestingly, Plato invokes these two contradictory meanings in the cited passage from the *Theaetetus* – we can thus say the peculiar way in which the trace manifests itself assumes both presence and absence, existence and non-existence, presentation and non-presentation, being forgotten and being remembered. A trace can exist in all its character “as a trace” only at the cost of the absence of that to which it refers – its erasure, being forgotten, going into the past.

Therefore, Plato perceived the trace and the questions associated with it, but did not draw any conclusions from it, practically losing sight of the matter immediately. He was restricted both by his own philosophical language and by the visual-pictorial character of Greek culture, which essentially equated a being or the state of being with that which is present, and that which is present with *eidos* in all its meanings – appearance, shape, form, nature, beauty. Trace in fact appears in the *Theaetetus* only in order to lead to an immediate image and representation, to constitute a direct or full presence, and to establish the complete domination of the dimension of the present. The relation between the trace and that which the trace refers to excludes both spatial and temporal parting or difference. Instead, it is understood – as Ricoeur also observes – as the appropriate matching or assignment of a new sensory impression to an earlier trace or reflection, which guarantees the recognition and manifestation of what is in fact known, though not at present directly in view, thus allowing true judgment to arise. In the Platonic scene of memory, therefore, everything takes place as in the scene in which Orestes and Electra meet, where any difference is expunged from the perfect familial likeness and total identification of brother and sister, thus permitting a dramatic *anagnorisis*. The trace itself is a harbinger and, at the same time, a guarantee of return or *parousia* – the reappearance of he who left it.

In Plotinus’s philosophy, we become acquainted more deeply with the trace and its nature. The author of the *Enneads* treats the trace positively only when it operates as a track leading directly to true being, recalling its essence and permitting complete anamnesis. The soul therefore experiences rapture in seeing, in the material world, a trace of something which is of a similar essence to it (*ichnos tou syggenous*), while the trace of virtue in a person is harmonized with his inner truth.²²³ However, he who wishes to know “that world” must “stop at some trace (*typos*) of it and investigate and study it thoroughly”²²⁴. At

223 Cf. Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, trans. Stephen Mackenna and B.S. Page, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plotinus/enneads.html> (access: 31.10.2012).

224 Ibid.

the same time, Plotinus describes “corporeal beauties” as “likenesses, traces and shades” (*eikones kai te ichne kai skiai*),²²⁵ thus putting the trace on the same ontological level as illusion and image, equating what Plato perceived as different.

Plotinus almost entirely excludes the question of the trace from the order of the soul, cognition and memory in the sixth tractate of the Fourth Ennead, entitled “Perception and Memory” (*Peri aisthesoes kai mnemes*).²²⁶ This is a hidden polemic with the conception of the trace laid out in the *Theaetetus*. Plotinus emphatically opposes the view according to which observations are imprints and stamps left on the soul (*ou typoseis oud’ ensfragiseis*), thanks to which anamnesis and true knowledge can then exist. Plotinus criticizes the trace, referring to four philosophemes fundamental to the entire Western tradition. First, he refers to the opposition of being and illusion cited earlier: “if we are to take the ‘prints’ of the objects we see, there will be no observation of the object themselves, but only the appearances and shadows of them.” Second, he refers to the already outlined dualism of the subject, that which sees, and the object, that which is seen. Treating this latter element as a visual representation (*horatos*, or “apparition,” but not in the negative meaning of *eidolon* or *phantasma*) located outside of the subject means that the material imprint of the external in the internal, as a trace of their physical “collision”, must disappear from this philosophical perspective: “for if in it [the soul] we put the imprint of the visible object, then the soul will not see what it is stamped with as an ‘apparition’, because there must be two things: the seeing subject and the seen object.” Third, Plotinus refers to the primacy of the inner over the outer and to the activistic, “energetic” concept of the soul, which does not receive observations and experiences passively, but “forms the awareness and comprehension of things” of its own accord. Yet lasting imprints left in the soul would rather be evidence of the weakness and passivity of the soul.

A fourth thread may be added to these three aspects of the critique of the trace: the opposition of transparency and lack of transparency. The world of ideas and true beings – which Plotinus treats as a world of ideal images, not painted but “natural,” existing by the power of their own essence and not referring to anything but themselves – is a world of ontological and epistemological transparency, which is emphasized by the omnipresent metaphor of life: “everything is transparent. No shadow limits vision. All the essences see each other and interpenetrate each other in the most intimate depth

225 Ibid.

226 Ibid.

of their nature. Light everywhere meets light.”²²⁷ The Greek noun *antitypos*, translated as “something impenetrable”, also means anything resistant, hard, and – in its original meaning – reflected. Therefore, Plotinus – unlike Heroclitus with the trace–sign (*semeion*) – puts the trace–imprint firmly on the side of what is dark or hidden (*skoteinon*), strongly contrasted with what is open, uncovered, exposed, or visible (*diafane*). The author of the *Enneads* treats this trace more radically than Plato – for whom it was a track ultimately leading to an image, representation or presence – since for Plotinus the materiality and opacity of the trace is an obstacle to the manifestation of being in all its “iconic” presence.

The Ethics of the Trace

Other aspects of the question of the trace – different both from metaphysical conceptions of the trace and their anti-metaphysical contraries – can be observed in the word and concept *akoloutheo*, meaning to follow someone, to accompany, to be obedient to, to imitate.²²⁸ Aristotle uses this more often than *mimeomai*, and in a different context. In *On the Heavens*, it is precisely in this meaning of *akoloutheo* that he speaks of the imitation of nature, as opposed to in *Meteorology* or *At Dawn*, where *mimeimai* or its derivatives appear in a similar context. To follow nature and to be obedient to it represent actions that are fundamentally different from copying or imitating it. They show nature not as an object, a static model to be reproduced in an equally immobile aesthetic presentation, but as a model, a source towards which a person should – in both literal and metaphorical senses – progress, a source by and towards which one should be led.²²⁹

The difference between *akoloutheo* and *mimeomai* also appears in *Poetics*, though this may not be clear in the Polish translation, where only the aesthetic-mimetic references of imitation are preserved. Reflecting on the object of imitation, Aristotle writes: “Since living persons are the objects of representation, these must necessarily be either good men or inferior – thus only are characters normally distinguished, since ethical differences depend upon

227 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, quoted in Van der Leeuw, J.J., *Conquest of Illusion* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1928), p. 42.

228 Zofia Mitosek emphasizes this religious aspect of imitation in the thesis “Mimesis a religia (o ‘Naśladowaniu Chrystusa’ Tomasza à Kempis)”, *Mimesis w literaturze, kulturze i sztuce*, ed. Mitosek, Zofia (Warszawa: PWN: 1992), reprinted in Mitosek, *Mimesis. Zjawisko i problem* (Warszawa: PWN, 1997).

229 However, this source element of nature is understood somewhat differently than in modern thought; Cf. Taylor, Charles, “Nature as Source,” Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

vice and virtue – that is to say either better than ourselves or worse or much what we are.”²³⁰ In the original, the phrase “thus only are characters normally distinguished,” meaning that they are either noble (*spoudaious*) or despicable (*phaulous*), is „*ta gar ethe schedon aei toutois akolouthei monois*.” In other words, characters almost always imitate or follow what is noble or what is despicable. Aristotle therefore clearly distinguishes “mimetic” – that is, artistic or aesthetic – imitation from those meanings of imitation containing clear ethical references. Furthermore, he seems to give priority to the latter, since before the act of representing characters on stage can occur, an act of imitation must first take place in real life.²³¹

These ethical senses of imitation as *akoloutheo* became dominant in Christian tradition, where the place of the Aristotelian nature as source would be taken by Christ – the Divine Logos. Imitation is conceived here in terms of the source, as the action of walking in somebody’s tracks, progressing, going after someone, accompanying them, following someone or something in both time and space. This tradition inherits and preserves both the “image” and the “imprint” ideas of imitation. In the theology of St. Paul, Christ is understood as both *eikon tou theou* – the image of the invisible God – and *character tou hypostaseos Patrosi* – the impression (imprint, stamp) of God’s essence.²³² The structure of humanity is also understood iconically. It is made impure by sin and renewed by the embodiment of the image of God,²³³ or – for instance, according to Origen – as a “stamp impressed in the image of the Creator.”²³⁴ The first formulation refers to pictorial similarity, while the second concerns hypostatic similarity, but both emphasize the strongly spiritual meaning of imitation, which cannot be reduced to aspects of mere copying. The visible-visible relation is replaced by visible-invisible. That which is imitated is no longer *eidos* or idea, as in Greek thought – that is, “being” conceived pictorially, and represented by

230 Aristotle, *Poetics* 1448a.

231 This fact is noted by Ricoeur, who argues that artistic imitation imitates life, which itself is imitative in character. This is Ricoeur’s mimesis I, whose ethical connotations the philosopher notices, yet without pointing either to the differences between mimesis and *akoloutheo*, or the fundamental difference between the examples of imitation he cites. Cf. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 86-98.

232 See: Letter to Colossians, 1, 15; Letter to Hebrews, 1, 3.

233 See: Evdokimov, Paul, *The Art of the Icon: a Theology of Beauty*, trans. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1990).

234 See: Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004). The contrast of being an image of God and being in the tracks of God can be found in Levinas in the essay “The Trace of the Other,” trans. Alphonso Lingis, Taylor, Mark (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

the image, *eidolon* or *eikon*. Instead, it is the “word” – “being” in its “non-pictorial” nature.

I have defined the above-mentioned context of the process of imitating and imitation as “religious-ethical” not only because of specific historical references – most fully expressed in the phrase *imitatio Christi*, or imitating of Jesus Christ – but also as a result of the general type of relations that this process designates between its elements.²³⁵ Unlike in the case of the process of representation – where the one doing the representing is in the dominant position, while the creation of representations serves as a means to control that which is the object of representation – the imitator, or tracer, finds itself in a position that is almost subordinate in relation to that which it is imitating. To imitate means to take as a model, to be obedient, or even to serve. The relation of subject and object is therefore replaced here by a relation of two subjects (entirely subjective, or rather intersubjective) – *somebody* is more likely to be imitated than *something*. Moreover, imitation projects a rich and diverse network of these relationships and references. Apart from the basic relations, expressed through the grammatical form of the accusative (to imitate someone or something), we may also find such forms as imitating through something or in something, imitating after someone, around something, towards something, towards somewhere.

The secularized version of imitation in its religious meaning can also be found in the humanistic interpretation of imitation as copying models. Already in perhaps one of the first texts representing this tradition, namely Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ mini-treatise *Peri mimeseos*, we find – apart from concepts crucial to this text and close to the Latin *aemulatio*: *dzelos* and *dzeloo* (to compete, copy) – the verb *ektypoo* (to make in relief, model, form to the model of something, reproduce), which is etymologically related to the noun *typos*. However, in Dionysius this loses the meaning of “imprinted” and means the “following of models”: “From the poetry of Homer [one should] imitate [*ektyposai*] not one part, but the whole.”²³⁶ Stacius too – in his descriptions of the relation of his epic *Thebaida* with its model, *The Aeneid* – writes that his work is not worthy to compete with Virgil’s work, but should rather imitate (*sequere*) it and venerate its traces: “*Nec tu divinam Aeneida tenta, / sed longe sequere, et vestigia semper adora.*”²³⁷ A similar idea can be found in Renaissance reflections on the imitation of ancient models. When Giovanni Pico

235 The religious contexts of the concept of mimesis have been discussed recently by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir in her book *Obraz osobliwy. Hermeneutyczna lektura źródeł etnograficznych* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), p. 39.

236 See: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Peri mimeseos*, Dionysii Halicarnassei *Opuscula*, vol. 2 (Teubner, 1929).

237 *P. Papinii Statii Opera Omnia* (Londini, 1824), vol. 3, p. 1513.

della Mirandola compares the Latin of modern and ancient writers, he writes that the former “want not only to be the course of meaning or appear similar to the old writers, but wish to go in such a way as in these tracks to put their own” [*nam nec cursu solum veteribus similes, nec gressu vel esse, vel vidi volunt quidam; sed ita incedere, ut eorum in vestigiis ponant vestigial*].²³⁸

Imitation assumes an inevitable distance between the thing or person imitated and the one doing the imitating. Moreover, this distance is not incidental or accidental, but original. It lies almost in the very ontology of the process of imitation, in which the situation of mediation is *de jure* inscribed, resulting from the unbridgeable ontological difference between the imitated and the imitator. This also excludes the situation that essentially constituted the main source of the Platonic fear of mimesis – that is, the possibility of “counterfeiting” an original (idea, *eidōs*) and its devious replacement with the *eidolon* or *phantasma* .

To imitate means to be consigned to the merely ostensibly tautological situation of tracing the traces, tracking the tracks of a person or thing that is forever slipping away from us, that is never completely present, and that cannot be made manifest. Two consequences result from this inherent distance between the imitator and the imitated. Firstly, the very structure of imitation incorporates interpretation. One does not merely walk or follow in the tracks in a physical and literal sense; one also deciphers them – as revealed by the phrase *legere vestigia*, meaning literally “to read the traces.” Secondly, imitation is open and infinite in nature, representing constant searching and striving. Therefore, it seems that such a conception of imitation allows us to go beyond the opposition of (full) presence and (complete) absence, since the person or thing we are imitating, following, or seeking to reach is always somehow given to us, representing the horizon of our desires, though this horizon is always slipping away and hiding, impossible to fully seize, make manifest, represent or replace.

These brief reconstructions of semantic themes inherent in the concept of imitation have placed it in marked opposition to representation. However, the semantic potential of this concept does not end here. Two other closely related semantic features or hues also deserve to be identified and emphasized. The first refers to heritage and succession. To imitate or to be a follower of someone also means to be an heir or successor. The situation of imitation therefore refers to being a co-participant, taking part in something – in other words, to the condition of participation in a certain tradition, though this tradition is given as a

238 Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni, Bembo, Pietro, *Le epistule “De imitatione” di Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola e di Pietro Bembo*, a cura di G. Santangelo (Firenze: Olschki, 1954), p. 32.

trace transmitted from the past. The second refers to such meanings as concern, care, preservation, observance, and looking after something. Therefore, imitation here would mean inheriting traces of a certain tradition, as well as looking after and taking care of these traces. Imitation perceived in this way is close to the concept of weak thought – particularly in Vattimo’s version – and its basic categories: trace, tradition and message, as ways in which being and cultural tradition are given, as well as *caritas* and *pietas*, as ways of referring to them. “*Pietas* is love of that which lives and its traces – the traces it leaves and which it preserves as received from the past,” writes Vattimo in *Etica della interpretazione*.²³⁹

Both of these traditions for understanding the trace – metaphysical and religious-ethical – may constitute a basis and starting point for attempts to construct a conception of mimesis as a very particular kind of imitation. First of all, this mimesis would not be aesthetic in character, or at least would not treat aesthetic contexts as the only or primary contexts. Secondly, it would assume a “weak” ontology, in which being would not have a “strong” form of essence – understood either as aletheic self-presence (in the sense of Platonic *physis*) or as object in the sense of a thing presented to a subject. At the same time, being would not be treated as an illusion – *simulacrum* – or as a fiction in the sense of a product of the inventive-projective power of the creative subject to create an autonomous reality. The trace as a mode of the existence or manifestation of being would both go beyond the metaphysics of full and unshakable (self-)presence and confirm the objective (meaning irreducible to the subjective project or creation) status of reality. Thirdly, it would not be based on the creation of pictorial representations of reality, nor on representation as duplicating presence, but rather on actions leaving a trace – responding with one’s own trace to the trace of reality. “Strong” being – given as presence and essence – may be depicted, represented, or imitated; “weakened” being – given as trace or remnant – can only be imitated (traced). Perhaps this is the profound meaning of Hölderlin’s famous poem, “Yet what remains, the poets found.”

The Three Versions of the Trace in Contemporary Philosophy

The issue of the trace occupies a very important place in the most important currents of contemporary philosophy: psychoanalysis, deconstruction, philosophy of dialogue, the various forms of hermeneutic thought, and finally weak thought itself. It is therefore no easy task to submit these various conceptions of the question of the trace to a uniform and cohesive description

239 Vattimo, Gianni, *Etica del’ interpretazione* (Rosenberg & Sellier: Torino, 1989), p. 20.

taking account of all their aspects and nuances. Rather than attempting a comprehensive description of this kind, I shall attempt to classify the various strands of thinking about the trace, taking as a starting point the division into the three mentioned above. It is difficult to incorporate all these ideas into any single classificatory scheme, since such a scheme would be full of ambiguities from the very outset. Plato, after all, used the words *typos*, *ichnos*, *semeion* interchangeably, and it would be hard to find a clear semantic classification for them. The various forms of “traceness” often overlap and partly coincide within the area of a single conception, thus creating a rich and “thick” picture of the trace. For this reason too, the classification proposed here is more of a conceptual net cast over a complicated and ambiguous reality, outlining certain important features of the trace and some of its contemporary conceptualizations. In the “remnant” form, we can place above all the conception of the trace developed by Vattimo himself, as well as those interpretations of the question that can be found in Levinas, and especially in the later works of Derrida and Nancy. The “imprint” variation of the trace can be found above all within the field of psychoanalysis, while the interpretation of the trace as sign is presented in Derrida’s works of the 1960s. This form of trace may also be linked with Lacan’s conception of the circulating signifiant from his seminar on the subject of Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*.²⁴⁰

The main characteristics of contemporary reflections concerning the question of the trace – irrespective of specific interpretations – include, first of all, the radical independence of the trace, the highlighting of its character as imprint or remnant, and its liberation from presence, origin and meaning.²⁴¹ Paradoxically, we might say that it is not someone or something present that leaves the trace, but – on the contrary – it is the trace that leaves (or establishes) the presence. Secondly, these reflections include the clear juxtaposition of the trace with the image, representation, depiction, and meaning. Thirdly, they include an attempt to describe the trace in a way that would go beyond the oppositions of being/non-being, hiddenness/openness, fullness/lack. Instead, they would locate the question of the trace in an area difficult to define ontologically and epistemologically.

A trace is a *typos* that is both imprinted and rubbed out, an *ichnos* that both persists or remains as a remnant and succumbs to disintegration or disappears, a *semeion* that both refers to an origin and eternally postpones the moment of its

240 See: Lacan, Jacques, *Ecrits* (Paris).

241 An exception here would be Walter Benjamin’s observation that a trace, unlike an aura, is a manifestation of proximity, making it possible to take possession of the thing that has left it. See: *Passages*, trans I. Kania (Kraków, 2005), p. 493.

identification and return to that origin. In the first form, the trace is most strongly opposed to the image, while “traceness” points to the impossibility of representation. In the second form, the trace functions in opposition to presence that is full and identical with itself, while “traceness” points to the impossibility of presentation. Finally, in the third form, the trace is opposed to reference and meaning, while “traceness” demonstrates the impossibility of the constitution of a stable sense.

This ontological ambiguity of the trace – which is the cause of the difficulty in unambiguously grasping it and the source of its attractiveness and semantic richness – is clearly visible in the conceptions of Levinas. Without a doubt, his ideas are foundational for contemporary reflections devoted to the question of the trace, as well as for those in Derrida’s writings. In Levinas’s case, the three aspects of the question continue to coexist in his ideas over the course of their development, while with Derrida we can perceive a clearer evolution in his thinking about the trace, in which different aspects of it move, chronologically, onto center stage.

The author of *Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger* speaks of the trace as both a sign and an imprint, both of which ideas contain within themselves clear references to a very radically treated concept of the remnant. The most important idea in Levinas’s conception of the trace is its connection with that which was never present but was always given as past – as absolute past, unremembered and irretrievable, the “distant some time.” The trace is not just what is left behind by some presence that has departed and become past, but – much more radically – it is the very manner of existence of that which is “outside,” that which is absolutely other: “*Being in the form of the leaving behind of a trace is passing, moving on, breaking away.*” Yet the trace marks the narrow boundary between hiddenness and unhiddenness, presence and absence, because although it is connected with the past as absolute absence, it is at the same time a symbol of the unerasability of being²⁴² – its indelibility (*l’indélébilité même de l’être*) and weight.²⁴³ Alternatively, as Levinas puts it in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, it is the trace of an absence, but one which still causes concern.²⁴⁴ In this context, the relations of the sign and the imprint in the trace pose a crucial question. The trace is not the same as any other sign, but rather every sign is a trace, meaning that the fundamental and constitutive dimension of the question of the trace is the leaving of an imprint (*empreinte*),

242 See: Levinas, Emmanuel, *The Trace of the Other*, op. cit.

243 Levinas, Emmanuel, *L’humanisme de l’autre homme* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1977), p. 67.

244 Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 145.

for example, by someone who precisely wants to erase the traces of a crime he or she has committed. The trace therefore means outside of all signifying intention – it is extra-intentional.²⁴⁵ In the trace, we find a wavering and a lack of correspondence between the signifier and the signified.²⁴⁶

Levinas also clearly contrasts the trace and the image. The face of the other, given as a trace, is something that goes beyond any visible form – that is, representation – but is also not an icon that could be equated with any form of original presence or presentation.²⁴⁷ For this reason too, being in the image and likeness of God does not, for Levinas, mean being an icon of God, but finding oneself in his trace.²⁴⁸

Levinas's conceptions, clashing with the interpretation of the differential nature of the linguistic sign according to Saussure, had the greatest influence on Derrida's understanding of the trace – particularly that contained in *Of Grammatology*, which would be closest in the classification proposed here to the concept of the trace as sign. Everything begins from the trace; the trace, or rather pre-trace does not mean the disappearance of the beginning, but that it is created in reverse by the trace, which precedes all being.²⁴⁹ This precedence of the trace is not some original or primal presence, but rather the opposite – it shows that no absolute source of meaning exists. The trace does not exist, it is not a being, and as such cannot be grasped in any network of binary oppositions. It is difference, that which – itself not being present or a signifier – is the condition of possibility for creating meanings through their differentiation, yet at the same time making it impossible to halt the process of semiosis and to constitute the ultimate *signifié*, the fullness of sense, authentic being, full presence.

The concept of the memory trace (*Erinnerungsspur*) plays an important role in Freud's description of psychic life – especially memory and its relations with consciousness²⁵⁰ – and was given an interesting and significant interpretation by Derrida and Lacan, among others. Interpreting the Freudian conception of the psyche and the role played in it by the memory trace, Derrida refers to the vocabulary of “imprints,” including “priming” (a term from Freud), resistance,

245 Levinas, Emmanuel, *L'humanisme de l'autre homme*, p. 66

246 Levinas, *The Trace of the Other*, p. 228.

247 Ibid., p. 220.

248 Levinas, Emmanuel, *L'humanisme de l'autre homme*, p. 69; *The Trace of the Other*, p. 229.

249 See: Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

250 On the Freudian conception of the trace, see: Laplanche, Jean and Pontalis, Jean-Bertrand, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac, 1973).

breaking into the trace, breaking through, cutting, and particularly the imprint left on the so-called magic block, which consists of a bottom layer – the wax block – and outer layer – of celluloid. At the same time, Derrida preserves his own semantic ideas from *Of Grammatology* of the trace referring to writing and written traces. In his view, both the metaphor of the wax block and the entire Freudian conception of the trace are still strongly rooted in the philosophy of presence: “Freud, like Plato, thus continues to oppose hypomnemic writing and writing *en tei psychei*, itself woven of traces, empirical memories of a present truth outside of time. Henceforth, the Mystic Pad, separated from psychical responsibility, a representation abandoned to itself, still participates in Cartesian space and mechanics: *natural* wax, exteriority of the *memory aid*.” Derrida therefore proposes the radicalization of the Freudian conception of the memory trace in order for it to be “extracted from the metaphysics of presence which still retains it (particularly in the concepts of consciousness, the unconscious, perception, memory, reality, and several others).”²⁵¹ This means that the essence of the question of the trace also incorporates the possibility of its being entirely blurred and erased, destroyed, and the trace itself is constituted by the combined power of repetition and erasure, intelligibility and unintelligibility.²⁵²

251 Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 286, 289.

252 Paweł Dybel (*Urwane ścieżki. Przybyszewski – Freud – Lacan* [Kraków: Universitas, 2000], pp. 205-206), in his remarks on Freud’s early essay “On Transience,” links the permanence of the memory trace to melancholy, a sense of loss, lack and absence – in this case caused by the destruction of a work of art: “We can therefore say that, paradoxically, this irretrievable loss, of something of the singularity of the representation of a work, a loss that we cannot come to terms with, is the very price that we must pay for the permanence of the ‘traces of remembering’ that are left in our memory. In other words, precisely because it has been recorded in the singular uniqueness of our memory, its departure from us leaves an equally unhealable wound in that memory.” Ewa Kobylińska (“Psychoanaliza i nowoczesność,” *Teksty Drugie* 2007, nr 1/2, pp. 27-28), referring to both Freud’s conception and the interpretations of Lacan and Derrida, accentuates the opposition of trace and image as well as the “erasability” of the trace: “Testing the specifics of melancholy (the psychopathology of grief), which is decided not by images, but by specific content – the incorporation of the object in itself as a foreign body – Freud formulates the *fundamental difference between images and cathexis (charging)*. Breaking with the model of the image, he performs a double move. On the one hand, he stresses the surprising strength of the act (marking, acting, unloading), and, on the other, in the place of images he begins to use the notion of *trace*. He is no longer interested in a subjective imagining of something, but the memory traces connected with an object and ‘the memory traces ‘recorded’ by the psychical apparatus. The memory trace consists of a series of *significations* (in the sense of Lacan’s *signifiant*), and not of individual impressions. These series recharge the memory traces and in this way record

Lacan – commenting on the same Freudian text as Derrida – points not so much to the unending series of traces comprising the “imprinting” or writing of memory, with no original or primal experience, as to the imprint (or “impression”) as what remains in the psyche after the traumatic incursion of the Thing (*das Ding*).²⁵³ The Thing is that which is absolutely other, external to the subject, alien to it, and even hostile. Lacan characterizes it as “the absolute Other,” as well as “the prehistoric and unforgettable Other” – in other words, in terms similar to those Levinas uses when speaking of God.²⁵⁴ Lacan’s Thing is impossible to manifest or represent (*Wortvorstellung*), a primal lack which remains beyond the possibility of being brought into sense. At the same time, it is the engine of our entire semantic effort, which aims to replace that void. For Derrida, the “original event” is lost in the series of trace-imprints, but for Lacan, it is accentuated with full force.

The trace understood as a remnant is clearly evident in Derrida’s works from the 1980s, including *Feu la cendre* (*Cinders*), where the paradigm of the trace is no longer the hunter’s trail, the clearing of the path, the furrow in the sand, the trail left by a ship in the water, or a footprint, but rather the ashes that remain after a sacrifice or burning incense.²⁵⁵ The ashes are that which is not – no thing, no object, nothing found “in the world” as being. Therefore, in order to describe its paradoxical ontological status, Derrida uses the impersonal French construction “*il y a*” (there is/are) or the German *es gibt* from Heidegger’s essay, “On Time and Being,” so as to emphasize that time “is” not in the way that a subject exists, but rather “is given.” Ashes are that which remains, a remnant of something which in fact was not and should not remain, a silent absence, something that both preserves and loses the trace from a person who has departed. The trace as ashes cannot be grasped either conceptually, as a result of

them. To say ‘trace’ and ‘recorded trace’ is to say the same. In the former case, we emphasize rather the impression, while in the latter we emphasize the repetition of the path. The concept of the trace incorporates wearing away (otherwise it would be presence), tearing away from direct contact with the origin, the impossibility of frontal confrontation, power differential, idiomatic nature and repeatability at the same time.”

253 On this subject, see: Bielik-Robson, Agata, *Słowo i trauma. Czas, narracja, tożsamość, Narracja i tożsamość (I)*, eds Włodzimierz Bolecki and Ryszard Nycz (Warszawa 2004), pp. 22-24.

254 Lacan, Jacques, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), p. 65. The Thing conceived in this way is the basis for moral activity, see: *Ibid.*, p. 68. A comparison of the notion of the Other and Levinas’s ethics with the ethics of psychoanalysis can be found in Harasym, Sarah (ed.), *Levinas and Lacan. The Missed Encounter* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1998). See particularly Chapters 4 and 6.

255 Derrida, Jacques, *Feu la cendre* (Paris: Des femmes, 1987), p. 27. Similar ideas can be found in Heidegger *et la question* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990); *Shibboleth*, op. cit.

its antinomic nature (it is being and non-being at the same time), or sensually, as it is not something that can be touched, seen, or experienced. However, this idea of remnants and fragility brings ashes closer to language, as “the word ashes is still the ashes of ashes,”²⁵⁶ which seems to refer to “reality” not as a sign but as a remnant, a trace of the world. Language is an urn of ashes, simultaneously fragile and weak, while also – through its very weakness – resisting disappearance and dispersion, more solid than any archives.

Jean-Luc Nancy too, in *Le vestige de l'art*,²⁵⁷ conceives the question of the trace in terms of “remnants.” In this essay, Nancy uses the concept of the trace, understood as an ephemeral remnant, an intangible fragment, to describe the status of contemporary art. Through a play on words – linking remnant or rest [*reste*] with resistance [*résister*], as well as trace or *vestige* with *investigation* – art is shown as a trace. The trace is what remains of art after the death of art, what still resists (the art market, commercialization) and continually searches for itself. The question of the trace is not identical with the sublime as a longing for the Idea, a desire for meaning and intangible presence, but rather it is more radical in character. The lack of Idea and meaning – their “withdrawal” – brings with it the end of art treated as a visible image of the invisible, which allows us to define art differently: as a trace, which is “different from an image.” There are two essential aspects of this difference. Firstly, the trace is vertical, “earthly,” referring to the surface, not to what is “above.” Secondly, the trace is tactile in nature (like a footprint, for example), and not visual.

Paul Ricoeur’s conception of the trace from *Memory, History, Forgetting* merits a separate discussion. Its starting point – as in the analyses proposed here – is the Platonic model of memory from the *Theaetetus*. Ricoeur, in his attempt at a typology of the various forms of the trace, distinguishes three general types: 1) traces recorded in a material substance; 2) impressions or feelings recorded in the soul, imprints or traces of shock or contact with some extraordinary event; 3) corporeal, cerebral or cortical sensations.²⁵⁸ In his analyses, Ricoeur concentrates on relations between the trace and the image (*eikon*), perceiving in this relation the aporia between the presence of the trace itself – its function to represent that which is absent, external simulation, the result of which is an imprint (*typos*) – and the movement of meaning (*semeion*), leading ultimately to the establishment of the image (*eikon*). However, Ricoeur’s reflections – which are fascinating from both a philological and a philosophical point of view – leave behind a certain sense of dissatisfaction. Firstly, he entirely neglects the

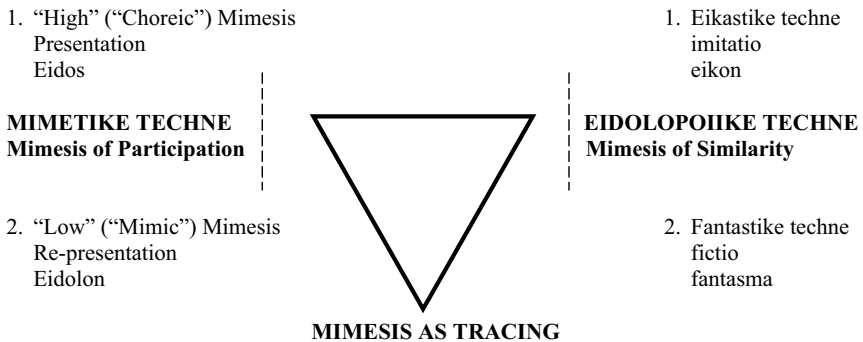
256 Derrida, Jacques, *Feu la cendre*, op. cit., p. 33.

257 See: Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Les Muses*. (Paris: Galilée, 1994).

258 See: Ricoeur, Paul, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, op. cit.

“remnant” dimension of the trace, which Plato describes in the *Theaetetus* with the word *ichnos*. Secondly, he introduces a clear opposition between the passive imprint (*typos*), which leaves in the soul or psychic apparatus the effect of the influence of external material factors, and the *semeion*, interpreted as a form of internalized, conscious semantic intention, which occupies a privileged place in Ricoeur’s ideas. Ultimately, it also seems that Ricoeur seeks solutions to the aporias he points to precisely in the reduction of the trace to its “pictorial” functions, which are associated with the full manifestation of that which is not manifest or present. In his discussion of the phenomenon of anamnesis, he writes that “recognition [...] consists in the exact superimposition of the image present to the mind and the psychological trace, also called an image, left by the initial impression”²⁵⁹. The trace is therefore equated with some form of *eikon*, and as a result loses much of its specificity. Ricoeur’s interpretation of the trace thus loses much of the radical character of Levinas’s, Lacan’s or Derrida’s interpretations.

Appendix: Plato’s Mimetic Triangle



The diagram shown here illustrates the connections between the three models of Platonic mimesis. In addition, I believe it can be used as a starting point from which to depict the more general typological and historical problems associated with the phenomenon of mimeticism. The strong distinction between *eidolopoiike technē* and *mimetike technē* – together with all its consequences – takes the form of abstraction and theoretical approximation. Essentially, these

259 Ibid., pp. 429-430.

two areas do not comprise separate groupings in Plato's writings, but rather they overlap and blend together. *Eidolopoiike techne* – described here as the mimesis of similarity (since its principle is equality, resemblance to the model and reproduction: *homoiotes, isotes, orthotes, eoikein*) – is in Plato's writings a later construction than *mimetike techne*, which represents the mimesis of participation, based on a complete or partial participation (*metheksis*) of the reproduction in the nature of the model. I propose to call the two vectors of the former – *eikastike techne* (whose product is the good, faithful image, or *eikon*) and *fantastike techne* (whose product is the bad image, or *phantasma*) – respectively “imitation” (as creation of an ideal copy, reproduction) and “fiction” (perceived most generally as a divergence from the model). Plato certainly separated these two vectors from each other and treated them as opposites. However, this is not the only possible solution. Indeed, Aristotle would soon endow the concept of *eikos* with the meaning of similarity, not merely freeing it from the negative connotations it carries in Plato's writings, but even considering it as more important and philosophical than the individual fact, since it expresses general and universal truths. The later development of Greek ideas – especially the significance that the Stoics would give to the concept of the imagination, the growth in significance of the tradition of inspiration (Plato's *Ion*) and the sublime (Pseudo-Longinus), as well as the process of internalization of the world of ideas and recognition of the human mind as their base – would continue to bring the notions of imitation and fiction closer together. In this way, questions of invention or creativity, as well as the autonomy of literary and artistic representation, would enter mimetic discourse. A deepening of this process can be observed in the neo-Aristotelian poetics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, where mimesis is rendered not only as *imitatio* or *raepresentatio*, but also as *factio* or *inventio*. As Vossius writes, “it is the particular duty of the poet to imitate and invent: these two (tasks), though they do not differ much, are in some way different. For imitation directs itself towards the thing being emulated, and fiction to what is made.”²⁶⁰ Therefore, a place between the poles of imitation and fiction may be given to “verisimilitude” – be it in the Aristotelian or neo-Classical versions, or, with certain reservations, that of the nineteenth century.

Mimetike techne in the narrower sense seems to be closer to the old, archaic forms of mimeticism, which I have called here the “mimesis of participation.” Its basis is an aletheic-manifestational, non-correspondence understanding of truth as discovery, “presentation,” distancing itself from the pole of imitation

260 Quoted in Sarnowska-Temeriusz, Elżbieta, *Zarys dziejów poetyki, od starożytności do końca XVII w.* (Warszawa, 1985), p. 578.

and coming closer to evocation, invocation, revelation, uncovering or even expression, though not in the Romantic sense, but rather as a provision of form and expression for that which is transcendent, secretive, alien and disturbing both in man himself and in the reality that surrounds him.²⁶¹ The origin of this “perfect mimesis,” or original mimesis (bearing in mind the fact that the first recorded meanings of the word “mimesis” referred to dance, so that its model can be seen as the ritual *chorea* reflecting or even creating the cosmos), can be sought in Plato himself. Although the dominant arguments in Book X of *The Republic* assume that only appearances and views of reality – not reality and truth themselves – can be the object of artistic imitation, this conclusion appears to be more rhetorical than factual. After all, in the same dialogue, Plato allows for the possibility of direct contact with the model, as seems to be demonstrated by a brief remark in section 596b, which is not developed any further and sounds rather mysterious in the context of all the reflections on the nature of mimesis: “And are we not also in the habit of saying that the craftsman who produces either of them fixes his eyes on the idea or form, and so makes in the one case the couches and in the other the tables that we use, and similarly of other things?” [*oukoun kai eiiothamen legein, hoti ho demiourgος hekaterou tou skeuos pros ten idean blepon outo poiei* [emphasis by A.Z.]. The idea of this original mimesis can also be found – in somewhat altered form – in later tradition. In the treatise *Peri Deinarchou*, which is preserved in fragments, Dionysus of Halicarnassus identifies two types of imitation: natural (*physikos*) and artificial. To the former he attributes “natural grace” (*autophyes charis*), deducing it from “oral learning and communing” (*katecheseos kai syntrofias*), while the latter comes about “thanks to the orders of art” (*ek ton tes technes paraggelmaton*).²⁶²

The traces of this type of understanding of mimesis can also be found in the motifs of the so-called “true image” or *veraicon*,²⁶³ the *acheiropoietos*,²⁶⁴ in a slightly different way in the mimetic structure of the icon,²⁶⁵ and finally in the

261 Gebauer, Wulf, p. 15

262 *Peri Deinarchou*, p. 307.

263 See: Kuryluk, Ewa, *Weronika i jej chusta: historia, symbolizm, i struktura „prawdziwego obrazu”* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1998); H. Belting, *La Vraie image. Croire aux images?*, traduit de l’allemand par J. Torrent, Paris 2007.

264 Tokarska-Bakir, pp. 337-343.

265 Among the numerous works devoted to icons, the most attention to their mimetic structure is given by Paul Evdokimov, in the book cited above, *The Art of the Icon: a Theology of Beauty*; Pavel Florensky in *Iconostasis*, trans. Donald Sheehan, Olga Andrejev (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications 1996); and Leonid Ouspensky in *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992).

various forms of neo-Platonism that developed alongside (or contrary to) the dominant, imitative interpretations of mimesis, such as the medieval neo-Platonism of the Chartres school²⁶⁶ or Renaissance Florentine neo-Platonism.

Eidos, or the idea – towards which original mimesis leads – means “natural” images existing in themselves, “appearances,” but rather in the sense of that which “appears” towards us, comes into sight – not referring to anything beyond itself. It was Plotinus who gave such images the greatest dignity, equating them with true beings, which are like “statues seen in their own light” [*par’auton enoromeia agalmata*] and “likenesses not painted, but essential” (i.e. natural, existing in and of themselves).²⁶⁷

The opposite pole is the ontological level described by Plato using the words *eidolon* or *phantasma*. This is apparently similar to what we today describe with the concept of the *simulacrum* – that is, an image detached or made independent from its original. This concept represents reality as described by the various forms of contemporary “weak ontology,” according to which what is “displayed,” or presented, is not the perfection of being, but the opposite – its fragility, weakness, incompleteness, superficial appearance, and trace nature. The process leading to the formation of these *eidola*, or *phantasmata* – in other words, of various kinds of ontological “counterfeits” or “forgeries,” which circulate instead of the original, natural “products” – is a mimesis closest to those aspects referring to fraud, or rather sleight of hand, not far removed from the activities of a mime artist.

It appears that the participatory model of mimesis – when interpreted appropriately and adapted to the philosophical and artistic questions at hand – is closer to the artistic and theoretical concepts of modernism than the model based on the imitation-fiction dichotomy. I would like to illustrate this thesis by referring to two metaphors – dance and mime – which occur frequently in modern literature and in the theoretical writings of modernists. These metaphors can be traced to the Greek meanings of mimesis, referring both to the “high” actions of ritual dance and to the “low” action of the mime artist-conjurer. Modern literature seems to flow between “choreic” striving for perfect mimesis – in which the medium of representation (the sign) disappears entirely, or rather is fully united with the thing that is represented (meaning or sense) in an act of mutual participation, formation and manifestation of presence (as in dance, the process and product, the sign and its designate, are essentially the same) – and

266 See: Gilson, Étienne, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955).

267 See: Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, op. cit.

the “conjuring” unmasking of this claim, which reveals the conventionality of any act of representation.

The place between these two poles is taken by the modern work of art, understood as the complete equilibrium of the sensual and the ideal, the empirical and the transcendent, the signifier and the signified. This is the conception of artistic form expressed in the major twentieth-century theories of literature – phenomenology and structuralism – which treated the work of art as an intentional being, different from real being and impossible to equate to it (Roman Ingarden),²⁶⁸ as a structure of a symbolic character (in Lacan’s meaning), an order different from the order of the imagined and the real (Deleuze²⁶⁹).

Sketching the Author

The Crisis of the Subject: Difference, Interpretation, Critical Point

The concept of crisis has become one of the main themes in reflections on the history of subjectivity over the last two centuries. Clearly a contribution has been made to these reflections by the intellectual and rhetorical attractiveness of theses put forward by various French philosophers, especially Foucault, Derrida and Barthes. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when they proclaimed the death of the human and the end of the subject, they were attempting to subject to revision and critique the main assumptions about the status of post-Cartesian subjectivity, seen as one of the primary forms of modern thought.²⁷⁰ Encompassed by this critique was the subject treated as a philosophical category (Derrida, Foucault), as well as the subject as “actor” on the social stage (Althusser), and finally the textual-literary subject – or more broadly, the “speaking” and “writing” subject – the subject as “author” of a text, work, discourse, or linguistic utterance (Barthes, Foucault).

The crisis of the subject sketched out in the second half of the twentieth century was therefore a multifaceted and complex phenomenon expressed in many fields, in many sciences and disciplines, and recognized and described in various categories and languages. Therefore, it would clearly be an undue

268 Ingarden, Roman, *O dziele literackim* (Warszawa: PWN, 1960), pp. 192-193.

269 See: Deleuze, Gilles, “How Do We Recognize Structuralism?” trans. Melissa McMahon and Charles J. Stivale, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1974*, ed. David Lapoujade (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

270 See: Judovitz, Dalia, *Origins of Modernity. Subjectivity and Representations in Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Touraine, Alain, *Critique de la modernité* (Paris: Fayard, 1992).

simplification to reduce all its many manifestations to a common denominator, treating them as essentially identical and homogeneous. On the other hand, it is hard to deny that the diverse forms taken by the belief in the shakiness of previous ideas on what it meant to be a subject – a coherent and self-identical individual, a source of cognitive, ethical and other acts, a creator of social *praxis*, an author of utterances and texts – possess some common basis. However, it seems that this basis is more negative in character. In its general outline and “moderately radical” form, so to speak, this basis can be reduced to the conviction that the subject cannot be treated as existing and functioning independently of, and prior to, other types of intersubjective structures or the contexts in which it appears, such as language and historical, social and mental structures.

The question of the “death of the author” or “end of the subject” etc. – though at one time it aroused quite some emotion and exercised a considerable influence on humanist thought – is today a historical question, a closed and concluded chapter. This is demonstrated for one thing by the fact that a number of works have been written discussing it, attempting in a synthetic manner to describe its main features, place it in the historical context, and grasp what has remained relevant from the violence of critical attacks on the subject.²⁷¹ I begin my discussion by mentioning these issues, in the briefest of terms, for two main reasons.

Firstly, perhaps all the most important ideas in contemporary reflection on the subject (whether in philosophical, sociological, or literary terms) refer in some way to this context. If, then, we have for some time been able to speak of a widely understood “return of the author” (to invoke the title of Alain Touraine’s famous book), then a crucial background to this phenomenon would be that author’s previous “departure.” In my view, it is not difficult to concur with the opinion that what took place in thinking about subjectivity in the 1960s and ‘70s to a great extent represented a kind of breakthrough, concluding a certain stage in reflection about the subject and beginning the next stage. The main figures of this stage, aside from the aforementioned Touraine, include Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Renaut, Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, as well as Paul Ricoeur (as the author of *Oneself as Another*) and many others.

However, in referring to this breakthrough, I intentionally avoid such terms as “post-structuralist” or “postmodern.” I believe it would be better to use the term “late-modern” to refer to the phenomena they describe. I do not think this is merely a matter of a terminological dispute. In my view – and this is the

271 See: Burke, Sean *The Death and Return of the Author. Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

second reason to refer here to the philosophy of the death of the subject – the apocalyptic theses of the late 1960s and early 70s were merely the drawing out of radical consequences from certain ideas characteristic of modern thinking about subjectivity. The crisis of the subject in the middle of the twentieth century was, in my interpretation, a conclusion or culmination of a certain history, which had commenced at the beginning of the century. Only what followed the crisis – what it paved the way for – can be described as the fully postmodern philosophy of the subject.

The very concept of “crisis,” however, conceals within itself more than might be immediately apparent. Considering it in its popular sense, in accordance with contemporary linguistic customs, we hear in it only, or at least above all, meanings referring to a weakening, shaking, undermining, or questioning of the status or position of a certain object. If we reach for the source meanings, however, a much greater semantic spectrum is revealed.

The Greek verb *krinein* and noun *krisis* mean above all to separate, divide, distinguish, set apart, differentiate (and, analogously, separation, division etc.). In addition to this spectrum of meanings – which refer in various ways to a common root of differing, being different, differentiating from something – there is also another important semantic family of the verb *krinein*, which refers to cognitive activity in the broad sense: to think, believe, consider, dispute, quarrel. It can also mean to assess, judge or pass judgment, including in the legal sense: to be the judge, to summon before a court, and, as a noun, judgment, investigation, trial, court case. Finally, an unexpected and interesting semantic family of the words *krinein* and *krisis* includes question, inquiry, research, as well as explanation, translation, and understanding. *Kritikos* originally means philologist, grammarian, literary critic. *Krites* or *kriter*, in turn, mean translator or interpreter, particularly interpreter of dreams (*enypnion kriter*). Those meanings of the concept of *krisis* that we might identify as being closest to the present popular understanding appear at rather distant points in the dictionary and only in a rather limited somatic context – referring to illness (crisis, the crucial stage of an illness).

I hope that these brief and amateur etymological reflections are something more than just linguistic-conceptual entertainment. According to my analysis, these main semantic ideas from the Greek etymology of the concept “crisis” – difference, explanation/interpretation, and turning or critical point – make it possible to perceive important and interesting aspects of modern subjectivity more clearly, and to grasp the main problems for understanding it. Above all, they help us understand the very emergence of the subject as something (someone) different or distinguished from a whole in which it (he or she) had previously functioned, from the embracing and securing context – as something

distinct, separated and separate, endowed with individuality, peculiarity, something opaque, secretive, strange and disturbing to thought. This thought must somehow cope with the new arrival, probe it, question it, interrogate, assess, and judge it, and perhaps even place it in the dock – or, in any case, interpret and explain it. The subject, facing these juridical-hermeneutical procedures, finds itself in a state of crisis, at a critical point – its status temporary, uncertain, constantly questioned, its rights suspended or placed in doubt. Yet explanations, interpretations, justifications are required only by that which has an unclear significance, that which is not obvious in and of itself, which has been thrown out of its secure immanence and plunged into a state of suspicion lacking the transparency of direct, self-confident cognition.

I repeat: thinking about the subject in the categories of crisis will therefore mean above all thinking in categories of difference, rather than identity. It will mean thinking in terms of what is separate, different, individual, and not of that which is general, common and the same. It will mean concentrating on what is given in interpretation, translation, explanation, and not on that which is given in direct and certain terms. It is also worth assessing the problem of the crisis of subjectivity in the anthropological or cultural context, pointing to the differences in the treatment of the subject and questions of its identity and authenticity between traditional and modern societies (in the broad sense).

Traditional subjectivity is rooted in lasting and stable mythological, cosmological and social orders. In order to realize itself fully, the subject had to accept and fulfill the functions, roles and archetypes set and passed on by tradition, which constituted intelligible and unquestionable models and patterns of identity and subjectivity. As Mircea Eliade writes, “[...] the man of a traditional culture sees himself as real only to the extent that he ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) and is satisfied with imitating and repeating the gestures of another. In other words, he sees himself as real, i.e., as ‘truly himself,’ only, and precisely, insofar as he ceases to be so.”²⁷²

Things are different with modern subjectivity. With no support from universal, supra-individual models of the “I” on which it can safely model itself, the subject is forced to take up the burden of its individuality and uniqueness, to continually renew the effort of self-creation, and, as a consequence, to accept its temporary, unsteady, transitory status. This insoluble tangle of being a subject and finding oneself in a state of crisis or uncertainty – at a critical point – was probably first noticed and expressed in the highly individual, idiomatic language of Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote that being oneself, and despair at being

272 Eliade, Mircea, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 34-35.

oneself, come from the same sources. They represent the painful gift that cannot be rejected or got rid of, “for despair is not a result of the disrelationship but of the relation which relates it to itself. And the relation to himself a man cannot get rid of, any more than he can get rid of himself, which moreover is one and the same thing, since the self is the relationship to oneself.”²⁷³

I suspect that the contexts mentioned above might also make it easier to understand Foucault’s apparently paradoxical thesis that the crisis of subjectivity (in the colloquial sense) forms a simultaneous process with the emergence of the figure of the subject itself. As we know, the author of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* locates this as early as the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, seeing its causes in the mutation of the whole European *episteme* of the time. This radical change in the structure of the sciences revealed the finite, limited and historical character of the human as a biological organism, as a being making use of speech and a producer of economic goods, thus portraying the human individual as a separate, particular and distinct being.

The ontological crisis of the subject – in both the meanings given above, i.e. the colloquial sense and what I will call the “original” meaning – is also accompanied by an epistemological crisis. Late in the eighteenth century and early in the nineteenth, man for the first time becomes, according to Foucault, an object of separate knowledge, of distinct discourse. This is to grasp not what is common, essential, unchanging in a person, but the opposite – that which is individual, unique, random, what has to this point, in accordance with the Aristotelian and Leibnizian term *individuum est ineffabile*, remained outside of the bounds of expression in rational categories.

Yet the possibility of “comprehending the individual in the discourse of scientific structure,”²⁷⁴ in which many thinkers of the late eighteenth century believed, was soon undermined in Kierkegaard’s writings. Since all knowledge operates in general concepts and categories, it is not capable of describing that which is individual, peculiar, separate and singular in a subject: “Only when the concept of the particular is given can there be any talk of selfishness, however, no science can say what the self is without stating it quite generally.”²⁷⁵ A similar problem is raised at the beginning of the twentieth century by Wilhelm Dilthey, who begins his essay “The Rise of Hermeneutics” by asking how it is possible to cognize an individual or individual being: “We have now to deal

273 Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 12.

274 See: Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1973).

275 Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 78.

with the problem of the *scientific* knowledge of individuals and indeed the main forms of singular human existence in general. Is such knowledge possible, and what means are at our disposal to attain it?"²⁷⁶

Therefore, the wavering of the status of the "I" as a lasting, stable being grounded on solid ontological, epistemological and anthropological foundations, as well as the awareness of this state of affairs, by no means appear for the first time in the 1960s or 1970s. To paraphrase Marx's famous dictum, one might say that the specter of the crisis of the subject – here meaning its critical point, illness, or weakening – has been hovering over Europe for at least 200 years. Its first manifestations should perhaps be sought in Romanticism. "I cannot give any other sample of myself, of my ego, than a system of fragments, because this is what I am," wrote August Wilhelm Schlegel²⁷⁷. Byron confessed that "my mind is fragment."²⁷⁸ It is also in Romanticism, it appears, where we may find the beginnings of both depersonalization, seen as a fundamental characteristic of modernist literature, and the many antinomies in which modern subjectivity is entangled.

The "Unfortunate Contradiction" of Modern Subjectivity – A Provisional Diagnosis

Foucault's aforementioned analysis – made at the close of modernity – that the rise of the modern subject brought with it a profound and comprehensive crisis, seems to be confirmed in Hegel's assessments from the beginning of (philosophical) modernity. In a critical description of the concept of irony as pure negativity, and of the concept of the subject that lies at its foundation, Hegel wrote in *Lectures on Aesthetics*: "The next form of this negativity of irony is, on the one hand, the vanity of everything factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth, the nullity of everything objective and absolutely valid. If the *ego* remains at this standpoint, everything appears to it as null and vain, except its own subjectivity which therefore becomes hollow and empty and itself mere vanity. But, on the other hand, the *ego* may, contrariwise, fail to find satisfaction in this self-enjoyment and instead become inadequate to itself, so that it now feels a craving for the solid and the substantial, for specific and essential

276 Dilthey, Wilhelm, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History: Selected Works, Volume IV*, trans. Fredric R. Jameson and Rudolf A. Makkreel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 235

277 Quoted in: Kurska, Anna, *Fragment romantyczny* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1989), p. 12.

278 Byron, George, *Life, Letters, and Journals of Lord Byron* (London: John Murray, 1839), p. 215.

interests. Out of this comes misfortune, and the contradiction that, on the one hand, the subject does want to penetrate into truth and longs for objectivity, but, on the other hand, cannot renounce his isolation and withdrawal into himself or tear himself free from this unsatisfied abstract inwardness. Now he is attacked by the yearning which also we have seen proceeding from Fichtean philosophy.”²⁷⁹

Hegel seems to be pointing to a certain paradox here not only for Romantic subjectivity, as expressed by the figure of irony, but also for modern subjectivity as a whole – perceptible more on the plane of a certain philosophical and aesthetic project than in concrete writing practice. On the one hand, the subject observes the principle of its freedom and the path to establishing itself as a “pure” “I” – or realizing its essence – in an inward movement, in fully freeing itself from that which is substantial, from specific content, definition and detail, empirical contents; in other words, from the sphere of chance, finitude, from historical and cultural factors, from that which is external in relation to the subject and, as such, remains outside the domain of subjectivity, outside the game of self-references of the free “I”, and outside the power of its sovereign creations. Yet this gesture of radical decontextualization of the subject turns into its opposite, as the strong “I” of transcendental tradition, stripped of any specific content; it turns out to be an empty, desubstantialized apparition, an “I” that is utterly abstract and formal, removed from the world of lived experience and the sphere of its own manifestation.

On the other hand, the “I” desires to break free from the cell of its immanence in which – ultimately – it only meets its own reflection. The “I” wants to place itself once again in the order of what is objective, to regain an active life within historical-cultural specificity, in that which defines and surrounds the subject – but by necessity from the outside. The state of melancholy often evoked by attempts to describe the modern subject²⁸⁰ comes from an unavoidable rupture – the impossibility of reconciling these two tendencies or placing them in one cohesive subjective project.

The progress of modernity – particularly artistic modernity – has brought with it an awareness of the growing role of external factors on subjectivity. The “temporary, transient I” of which Baudelaire writes in *The Painter of Modern Life*,²⁸¹ is a subject immersed in the unpredictable, unfathomable and

279 Hegel, G.W.F., *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1. trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 66.

280 See: Bieńczyk, Marek, *Oczy Dürera. O melancholii romantycznej* (Warszawa: Sic!, 2002), pp. 17-19.

281 See: Baudelaire, Charles, “The Painter of Modern Life,” *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964).

unstoppable current of modern life. This subject is both defined and perceivable by accidental, historical signs, such as dress or fashion, and not by any essential, unchanging or extra-historical character. Modernity – in its culminating, “heroic” phase – exhibits a belief in the possibility of the conscious subject fully appropriating its own history and products, in aligning and merging the manifold cultural contexts in which the “I” is immersed, in building from these a lasting, stable foundation on which the subject could be constructed. A characteristic example of this dialectical version of thinking about subjectivity is given by Stanisław Brzozowski in *The Legend of Young Poland*: “The I of each of us is entwined in a process that encompasses the entirety of European culture and history: we will not be free, will not be ourselves, unless we take control of the whole culture at its roots, learn to rule over it, as a work that is obedient to us.”²⁸² Late modernity, on the other hand, evinces a tendency to describe the subject rather in terms of difference, rupture, as unavoidably subjected to, and determined by, cultural mediations, incapable of controlling them, and as a result disintegrated, split into many social masks and roles, into that which is superficial, manifest, possible to grasp and describe, and that which is profound, beyond the control of consciousness, unnamable.²⁸³

We can therefore describe this antinomy of the modern subject, in simplified terms, as follows: either the subject is full, strong, founding both itself and the world as its own project, particularly as an aesthetic project, or the subject is an “empty place” (Deleuze), a “bearer of the structure” (Bourdieu), a product lacking the stable identity of historical structures. Either the “phantomization” of the pure “I,” or the dispersal of the empirical “I.” Either awareness of alienation in historical products and forms escaping the subject’s grasp, or faith in appropriating and taking control of them. Modern subjectivity is condemned not only to perpetually oscillating between these two poles, but also to conceiving these ends of the scale in antinomic, disjunctive, mutually exclusive categories – just as in the earlier mentioned rhetoric of death, elimination, exile and the constantly repeating gesture of return and restitution. This condition of suspension, balancing between centripetal and centrifugal movement, the internal and the external, is clearly shown by two quotations from Gide’s *The*

282 Brzozowski, Stanisław, *Legenda Młodej Polski. Studia o strukturze duszy kulturalnej* (Lwów nakładem księgarni polskiej B. Połonieckiego, 1910), p. 15.

283 See: Alain Touraine, *Critique de la modernité* (Paris: Fayard, 1992), especially Chapter 2: *La destruction du Moi*; Butler, Christopher, *Early Modernism: literature, music and painting in Europe 1900-1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Zawadzki, Andrzej, “Dokument pisany kluczem. Kilka uwag o nowoczesnej koncepcji podmiotu i jej filozoficznych kontekstach na przykładzie poglądów Stanisława Brzozowskiego,” *Teksty Drugie*, 2002, nr 4.

Counterfeiters and Gombrowicz's *The Marriage*. Gide writes: "and I never feel myself living so intensely as when I escape from myself to become no matter who. This anti-egoistical force of decentralization is so great in me, that it disintegrates my sense of property – and, as a consequence, of responsibility."²⁸⁴ Gombrowicz writes: "What does it matter (I ask) that I, I am in the very middle, the very center of everything, if I, I can never be myself? And outside of me do I create myself?"²⁸⁵ The first of these depicts the shifting of the "I"'s center to the outside, showing that being oneself, being authentic means, paradoxically, being outside of oneself, being "somebody different," the unending gesture of "appropriating" the "I" from the tyranny of petrified and fixed forms of subjectivity – not those deriving from outside the subject, like the alienating powers of history, but those produced "inside," by the subjective center striving to define itself. The second quotation shows the reverse phenomenon, though one that is complementary to the first: the incursion of the external into the center of the subject, the impossibility of being oneself and defining oneself "from within."

The complete disappearance of the author from the text, the breaking of the bonds of the empirical and fictitious "I" of the text – in other words, the concept of depersonalization that is fundamental to modern literature and describes it in theory – is located at the intersection of these two tendencies. On the one hand, it seems to be closely related to the desubstantialization of which Hegel writes, to the attempt to establish a "pure I," which is, as David Kolb writes, a pure subjectivity, not allowing itself to be grounded in any set of rules or norms – subjectivity in a constant game of self-reference.²⁸⁶ On the other hand, this attempt to detach the "I" from becoming, from the chance nature of historical contexts, from the empirical abyss and mutable experience, is precisely a response or a reaction to the typically modern condition of uprootedness, alienation, and loss of subjective autonomy. This attempt is made with much greater awareness than in Romanticism that the "I" is constantly restricted and conditioned by linguistic mediation.²⁸⁷

284 Gide, André, *The Counterfeiters*, trans. Dorothy Bussy (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 71.

285 Gombrowicz, Witold, *The Marriage*, trans. Louis Iribarne (New York: Grove Press, 1969), p. 134.

286 Kolb, David, *Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger and After* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 19.

287 Nycz, Ryszard, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości. Problematyka epifanii w nowoczesnej literaturze polskiej* (Universitas: Kraków, 2002), p. 54.

The Author's Traits: The Trace as a New Formula for the Presence of the Subject in a Text

Death and return, exile and return – for over three centuries, theoretical reflections on the literary subject have seemed to swing like a pendulum between the funerary-elegiac and the restitutive-resurrectional. In this fluctuation, the gesture of the author's exile from the text has been easier than the efforts required to return him, and to reintroduce the category of the subject to discourse on literature and culture more broadly.

Unlike the conception of the death of the subject – which, in spite of the diverse aspects and ideas constituting it, today has a reasonably clear and rather sharply defined outline – the perspective of the author's return is far from having emerged in any unambiguous way that would be easy to grasp or to describe cohesively. The methodological inspirations for this return are also diverse in character, and can be traced to various areas of humanist thought.²⁸⁸ Proponents of certain currents within contemporary humanistic sociology have demanded the return of the category of the subject, proposing that it be described in a language that would permit consideration of that which is the result both of social factors and of the subject's conscious and deliberate acts.²⁸⁹ Narrative conceptions of identity show the role of both active experience and the story – that is, the act of linguistic mediation – in constructing the “I” and the world of its experience.²⁹⁰ Lastly, ethical conceptions, inspired particularly by the ideas of Levinas, perceive speech as that dimension of human experience in which the immanence of the subject is questioned in favor of the Other, and demand that literary discourse too should include a category of responsibility, which can only be rooted in a living, concrete subject, and not in a fictional subject.²⁹¹ The common feature of all these tendencies, despite their obvious

288 On the question of the return of the author, see especially: Burke, Sean, *The Death and Return of the Author. Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), and Simion, Eugen, *The Return of the Author*, trans. James W. Newcomb (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

289 See: Touraine, Alain, *Le Retour de l'acteur: essai de sociologie* (Paris: Fayard, 1984), pp. 93-99; Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) .

290 See: Ricoeur, Paul, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blarney (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially Chapters 5 and 6; Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); McIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University Press, 1981).

291 See: Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961).

differences, is that the attention on subjectivity is shifted from the theoretical and essentially cognitive plane (the transcendental subject as basis for certain knowledge about the world) to the practical or empirical plane – to the world of common, everyday experience and the manifestation of the concrete, finite “I.”

One might even ask: return of the subject – but which one? On the one hand, the radical version of the death of subjectivity has been questioned, and yet – on the other hand – a return to the traditional, “strong” subject is widely viewed as impossible (even if this subject was only created by the opponents and critics of the modern form of the subject) – that is, in the most general terms, a return to a subject perceived as entirely transparent to itself, cohesive, comprehensive, and independent of linguistic and cultural mediations.

Weak ontology – in which perspective I would like to locate my own thoughts about the subject and the author – seems at first glance to be yet another version of the narrative that suggests a parting with the modern, “strong” subject. Indeed, the title of one of Vattimo’s essays on subjectivity is precisely “*Soggetto addio*” (“Farewell, subject”).²⁹² However, in my opinion, the category of the trace fundamental to this tradition of thought allows for a somewhat different, richer treatment of the question of subjectivity, pointing to a way out of certain important antinomies in which, as I have attempted to show, the modern subject lies.

Among the various forms taken by the broad notion of the subject’s return – including, and perhaps especially, the return of the author to the text – the conception of the subjective trace seems to be resonant and useful, in spite of a certain vagueness, ambiguity and metaphoricity. Indeed, the concept of the trace might make it possible to extract from this antinomic trap both the full presence (before language, before/outside the text) of the subject and the author (in language or the text) and their complete absence or death. Examining subjectivity in categories of the trace – with the whole range of semantic references that accompany it, including the imprint, the remnant and the sign – means two things at the same time. On the one hand, it means “weakening” the subject, allowing it to be dispersed, broken, divided into fragments, to lose its identity, the etymologically perceived crisis of the “I” in the sense of the “critical point” of an illness, thus denying the subject the privileged position it has occupied in modern thought. The subject given in traces, or as a trace, is an absent, non-present subject, always, past, marked by difference, incomplete. On

292 See: Vattimo, Gianni, *Filozofia al presente* (Milano: Garzanti Editore, 1990) On the weak subject see also P.-A. Rovatti, A. Dal Lago, *Elogio del pudore. Per un pensiero debole* (Milano, 1989); P.-A. Rovatti, *Abitare la distanza. Per un’etica dell’linguaggio* (Milano, 1994).

the other hand, the trace cannot be interpreted solely as one more metaphor for the death or exile of the subject, since it is also proof of its existence – even if this is a weak existence marked by permanent crisis – and a form of subjectivity’s persistence. The trace prevents the complete erasure of the subject and safeguards it from annihilation. Therefore, the trace both dispossesses and establishes subjectivity. As Derrida argues, in the trace is placed the act of repetition and erasure, the establishment and eradication of the individual signature.²⁹³ As I mentioned earlier, a similar semantic intuition can also be found in the Greek word *ekmatto*, which means both to erase and to leave a trace.

It was also the trace that served Barthes, just a few years after his proclamation of the death of the author, as a metaphor for the return of the subject to the text. The metaphors used by the author of *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* recall both Vattimo’s conception of the artistic form as a monument to the *End of Modernity* and Derrida’s metaphor of language as an urn of ashes from *Feu la cendre*: “For if, through a twisted dialectic, the Text, destroyer of all subject, contains a subject to love, that subject is dispersed, somewhat like the ashes we strew into the wind after death (the theme of the *urn* and the *stone*, strong closed objects, instructors of fate, will be contrasted with the *bursts* of memory, the erosion that leaves nothing but a few furrows of past life): were I a writer, and dead, how I would love it if my life, through the pains of some friendly and detached biographer, were to reduce itself to a few details, a few preferences, a few inflections, let us say: to ‘biographemes’ whose distinction and mobility might go beyond any fate and come to touch, like Epicurean atoms, some future body, destined to the same dispersion.”²⁹⁴ Although Barthes clearly does not

293 See: Derrida, Jacques, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” *Writing and Difference*, op. cit.

294 See: Barthes, Roland, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 8-9. In Polish literary studies the trace understanding of the subject/author is represented by, among others, Małgorzata Czermińska (“Wygnanie i powrót. Autor jako problem badań literackich,” p. 173): “I would like to call the place to which the author has returned ‘the trace,’ which is imprinted in the text. A trace, because it is unavoidable and unintentional at the same time. Because it is left for whoever comes.” Ryszard Nycz treats the trace as a way for the author’s personality to exist (*Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*, op. cit., pp. 84-87). The trace in the context of the author’s presence in the text is also mentioned by Maciej Michalski and Magdalena Horodecka. Michalski (*Dyskurs, apokryf, parabola. Strategie filozofowania w prozie współczesnej* [Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2002], pp. 57-73), speaks of traces “never fully present in the presence” of the author in three contexts: external to the text, intertextual and intratextual. Horodecka, writing about the subject of Ryszard Kapuściński’s *Lapidaria*, treats the “I” both as immersed in the traces of the world and as one of the traces of the world; See: Horodecka, Magdalena, “Ja

abandon the thesis that the Text inevitably destroys subjectivity, he does add that it is literature and writing that represent the place of the return of the author, a space in which he can exist and endure. This contradiction is essentially only apparent, since it is precisely the disintegration of the strong subject in its classical modern form – whose fullest expression is the biography, as a *summa* unifying and “monumentalizing” the existence of the individual, providing it with a universal and institutional character – that permits the emergence of a new form of existence and manifestation of subjectivity. The constitutive elements of subjectivity are not persistence, wholeness, immutability, essentiality (expressed by Barthes through the metaphors of the urn and the stone, which refer to the classical topoi of eternity, immutability and immortality), but rather the opposite – disintegration, dispersal, “traceness,” and impermanence. Significantly, these are treated not as afflictions, chance occurrences or lamentable deficiencies – to be redeemed by art and literature, thereby permitting man to triumph over his temporal and limited nature – but rather as qualities almost instilled in the very essence of the subject and the form of its existence, which are expressed in “weak” artistic form, in writing as leaving behind essentially impermanent traces. These traces also constitute a form of communication, of making contact with the other, though treated not from a semiotic or hermeneutic perspective, as deciphering or interpreting the “image of the author,” but rather in ethical terms, as traces demanding to be dealt with and responded to.

Barthes’s comments are fundamental in nature to the trace conception of the textual subject. The interesting proposition of the (self-)portrait as the form of the author’s presence in a work can be found in two books: Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind* and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Le regard du portrait*. Both of these works – similar to each other in certain ways – are based on the concept of the *trait*, portraying or tracing (*tracer*). The authors, proceeding in accordance with the deconstructive style of thought, extract from these concepts various semantic threads, often unexpected and at first glance far removed from popular associations – for instance, the painterly line, stroke, contour, outline, but also “trait” as a characteristic quality, hallmark, or even as “retreat” (*re-traite*).²⁹⁵ To simplify Derrida’s arguments somewhat – and to extract from them those

wśród śladów świata. ‘Lapidaria’ Ryszarda Kapuścińskiego,” *Narracje po końcu (wielkich) narracji. Kolekcje, obiekty, symulakra...*, ed. Gosk, Hanna, Zieniewicz, Andrzej (Warszawa: Elipsa, 2007), pp. 442-445.

295 See: Derrida, Jacques, *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self-Portrait and the Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 2-3. In the next part I refer particularly to Derrida’s observations from pages 44-69.

aspects relevant to the present analysis – we can say that “portraying” is a paradoxical action, since it at once establishes its object and makes it impossible for it to manifest itself fully or exist.

Derrida distinguishes three basic aspects of the “trait.” Firstly, the action of “portraying” makes representation possible, though it does not itself belong to this representation. It remains external to representation, in itself not part of the mimetic order, so that between the thing drawn (or traced) upon and the line drawn (traced or portrayed) lies an unbridgeable chasm. That which makes visibility or representability possible must itself remain invisible and unrepresented. Secondly, the product of the portraying process – the traced outline of the object – also remains invisible, which Derrida describes as the “retreat (*retrait*) or disappearance, the differentiating non-appearance of the trait.” The trait is invisible and inexpressible. It does not have a positive character; it is not “something,” a particular thing – much like the trace, or the ashes from Derrida’s essay on flame and ashes. It cannot be perceived either sensually or intellectually, but is rather pure separation, the tracing of a border, differentiation, delimitation, which in turn brings it closer to the trace as sign, from *Of Grammatology*. Finally, the third aspect of the trait, defined as its rhetoric, emphasizes the fact that with-drawing (*retrait*) – understood here both as the “retreat” of the line and as its “iterability,” repetition, or “repeated drawing” – makes it possible for language and stories to appear, building an unbreakable connection between drawing and speaking. The “verbal event”²⁹⁶ – which does not belong to the space of the work, but to its “parergonal border” – permits the identification of the self-portrait and ensures it the appropriate legal status.

Perhaps the most interesting conclusion resulting from Derrida’s analyses is the paradoxical nature of the trait and drawing (or tracing), which simultaneously establishes the subject of the self-portrait and “conceals” it, causing it to “retreat” and preventing its full and faithful representation. This “transcendental” trait (as both *trait* and *re-trait*) – as Derrida calls it – causes the contemplating eye and drawing finger to be visible, and at the same time to vanish, both represented and “obscured,” while the self-portraying subject sees itself vanishing before its very eyes. This is why the central metaphor describing the vision of the self-portrait is the metaphor of blindness. The second central, titular metaphor in *Memoirs of the Blind* – the ruin – points to the always incomplete, thus somehow imperfect and damaged nature of the self-portrait, which forms an essential and original characteristic emanating from the very structure of the work. The ruin is what happens in the beginning, and to the

296 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

beginning (as that which is full, self-identical, present), without referring to any past whole or giving any hope for a future reconstruction or “restoration”. Developing this idea, we could say that the self-portrait is built from remnant-traces, though not as remains left after something and not treated organically as part of a greater whole, but rather functioning as an ontologically self-contained domain, which does not refer to any real or potential totality.

Nancy, in *Le regard du portrait*, does not speak of the self-portrait, but of the portrait in general. However, like Derrida, he makes use of the etymological potential of the “trait” to characterize the presence of the subject in the portrait, in which the philosophical ambivalence of subjectivity is also revealed in a powerful way. Whereas the author of *Memoirs of the Blind* constructed his conception of the self-portrait in reference above all to its “drawing” as “retreat” (*re-trait*), portraying – according to Nancy – means in its original sense “extraction” (*ex-traire*) or “dragging” the subject out of its immanence and being-in-itself. The etymological games Nancy plays are difficult to translate. They effectively build ideational links between the *trait*, extraction (*ex-trait*), por-trait and the action of por-traying (*portrait*; *peindre*; and *portraiturer*, which refers to portraying in literature). The basic sense of the trait is to cause the subject to manifest itself, while the task of portraying is to pull (*tirer*) out, pull forwards, or “to present.” Yet Nancy does not treat the portrait as a copy, imitation or simple likeness, nor as some form of revelation, or internal disclosure, of the spiritual essence of the portrayed subject. This “pulling-out” or extraction of presence is not “extracting from absence, but to the very point of absence,”²⁹⁷ since it causes the subject to lose its original identicalness and self-identity. The portrait therefore draws (*tire et trace*) both the birth and the death of the subject,²⁹⁸ revealing with full clarity its ontological ambivalence: on the one hand, its presence in itself, its being enclosed in the work, its sovereignty, and, on the other, its being outside itself, its emerging from its immanence. The trait is that place “of the meeting, failed from the outset, of the subject with itself,”²⁹⁹ and – we might add – with the trace, which both constitutes and undermines the full presence of the subject in its artistic representation, giving it form and also “separating” it from itself, marking it with internal rupture and splitting. Subjectivity cannot exist alone in itself and independent from what is external to it – the forms, of painterly or textual representation, which create it by drawing or tracing its basic shape. In this way, however, it also experiences alienation, losing its essentiality and “innerness.”

297 Nancy, Jean-Luc, *Le regard du portrait* (Paris, 2000), pp. 50-51.

298 Ibid., p. 68.

299 Ibid., p. 82.

Derrida's and Nancy's reflections refer to the painted portrait, though there is nothing to prevent them from being applied to the broadly viewed category of the "image of the author" in literature, understood as "traits," "portraying" or "tracing," in all the semantic potential of these words: portraying as the act of creating (in text or pictures) a representation of a subject, its self-portrait; "traits" as elements that are significant, characteristic, or peculiar; finally, tracing or "marking" as damage, deficiency, or weakening – corresponding to the withdrawal or "retreat" (*retrait*) described by Derrida and Nancy.³⁰⁰

Thus we have "portraying" as the drawing or tracing of the author's presence in the text, or as his outline or traits. These formulations seem to provide a much richer conception than the unequivocal declaration of the death of the subject in the text – its "de-facement."³⁰¹ They show the subject's oscillation between presence and absence, identity and difference, allowing us to reintroduce the author into the text, though not in the form of a stable being, but rather as a transient and ambiguous trace, drawing or tracing its unclear presence into the text.

300 Translator's Note: This last set of associations is not as clear in English. In Polish, "rysa" can mean, among other things, "scratch," "crack," or "flaw," while "rys" means "trait," "feature" or "outline."

301 See: De Man, Paul, *Autobiography as De-facement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

III. MODERN LITERATURE AND TRACES

Introduction

The interpretations included in this section are of an illustrative nature – in the sense that the conception of weak ontology and the idea of the trace guide my readings of particular texts. However, I do not wish to treat creative literature as mere exemplification of philosophical theses, or even of concepts from literary theory. In fact, I shall try to demonstrate how the texts interpreted here may disturb the clarity of my earlier division into three types of traces. Weakness and the idea of the trace will take on rich, various and often unexpected meanings. At the same time, I believe that reading selected examples from modern Polish literature through the lens of the concept of weak ontology – and especially of the trace in its various forms – will allow me to connect literature with certain crucial philosophical problems, to reveal previously imperceptible links between certain texts, and, finally, to recognize a certain essential tradition in Polish literary modernism and to describe it in a more or less consistent language. For example, the theme of the faulty, shoddy reality, which appears frequently in the literature of the 1990s (Andrzej Stasiuk, Magdalena Tulli), appears to originate in Bruno Schulz's prose. Roman Jaworski, who is treated as the patron of the aesthetics of the ugly and grotesque in Polish literature of the twentieth century, may also be acknowledged as the patron of the popular 1960s concepts of the "trash heap" of culture (Tadeusz Różewicz) and the "wreck" (Tadeusz Kantor). Jaworski was perhaps the first to express a vision of culture as museum, or rather chaotic junk heap, of cultural forms from the past. What allows us to perceive certain similarities in these diagnoses, which are clearly different in many respects, is the concept of the trace as remnant. In turn, the interpretation of the subject as trace – clearly expressed by Różewicz, Włodzimierz Odojewski, and later by Olga Tokarczuk, among others – may be found in Bolesław Leśmian's work, where it is additionally accompanied by the traumatic and sublime experience of the imprint of something closer to the nameless, the other, or the inexpressible. The trace of the other, though it is viewed more in the historical than the metaphysical perspective, also appears in the prose of Stefan Chwin. Literature after 1989 has placed a strong emphasis on the ethical dimensions of the trace, which are also present in the thought of Levinas and Lacan. The ethics of the trace represents perhaps the greatest contribution of post-1989 literature to the diverse and rich interpretations of the trace found in Polish literary modernism.

“Tracing the Traces”: An Overview of Weak Ontology in Polish Literature of the Twentieth Century

The crucial tradition for weak thought – apart from the late phase of dialectical philosophy and the philosophy of difference – is the phenomenon of nihilism in the sense given to it by Nietzsche and Heidegger, later reinterpreted by Vattimo in the spirit of weak ontology. It was precisely in this version of nihilism that a mode of experiencing being conceived and projected for the first time – and this is my first thesis – as characteristic of late modernity. This mode of experiencing being also replaces “strong” ideas, such as essence, substance, or object, with ideas that might be described in the most general sense as “weak,” including, among others, transmitted tradition, message, gift and trace – particularly in those meanings of the trace that emphasize the idea of the remnant or relict. The trace as remnant may be provisionally characterized in opposition to two of the grand conceptions of nineteenth-century thought, both still relevant in the twentieth century: dialectics and the organic. It constitutes that element which cannot be submitted to totalization or appropriation, nor referred to some other reality or potential whole as a mere integral part. Thus it bears more of a resemblance to such categories as the “*presque rien*” from Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* or the Heideggerian idea of *Gering* (meaning something insignificant or humble), which Vattimo considers “the possible definitions of being in the era of the end of modernity.”³⁰² Alternatively, it might resemble the fragment in Pier Aldo Rovatti’s interpretation: “Consider the tiny fragment: meaningless, useless, often absurd. At the margins, a particular. Is it there that being concentrates? If we succeed in capturing the gaze [*sguardo*] which is looking at us from this point but without seeing us, we are taken by vertigo. It is the sensation we experience before a void or unknown, as the tiny fragment reveals itself to be infinitely great, an absolute, a splinter of eternity.”³⁰³

We might also find patrons of weak ontology in philosophers who do not refer directly to the nihilism of Nietzsche and Heidegger, yet still reach conclusions similar to Vattimo’s by other paths. Among these philosophers are Levinas, who was perhaps the first to use the metaphor of weakness in an ontological context (“As if a strange weakness caused *presence* or being-in-act

302 Vattimo, *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, p. 204.

303 Rovatti, Pier Aldo, “Transformations in the Course of Experience,” *Weak Thought*, eds. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, trans. Peter Carravetta (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), p. 70.

to shiver and topple³⁰⁴), and Noica, in whose ontology weak or weakened being clearly takes ontological priority: “only by coming out of weakened being [ființa slabita] may we understand what being is.”³⁰⁵

The tradition of interpreting nihilism that I am sketching out here – in which nihilism is raised to the level of an essential, or rather fundamental element of the philosophical project of modernity – seems to me to be much more interesting and useful in the interpretation of important phenomena in twentieth-century art and literature than the common understanding of this phenomenon as a kind of subversive ideology, a worldview associated with a specific social and political context, and frequently presented in the novels of Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Zola, and Stanisław Przybyszewski (to give only the most well-known examples). Therefore, my second thesis proposes that the various forms of weak ontology, which originated in nihilism (I repeat: in its Nietzschean and Heideggerian version), have not only found clear expression in modern art and literature – at times even becoming the privileged realm of their investigations and practices – but in fact have shaped their ontological and aesthetic foundations. Adopting this thesis does not mean that I treat literature merely as an illustration of certain philosophical conceptions. On the contrary, at the conclusion of my study I wish to show how certain literary texts may inscribe themselves into the horizon of nihilism and weak ontology, while simultaneously going beyond it. I have no wish to answer the broader question – one that has been poorly framed in general – of whether art and literature have drawn inspiration here from philosophy, or vice versa. It would seem more important to attempt to show how diverse practices, discourses and fields of human expression have all striven to name a phenomenon that I would perceive not merely as an academic problem, but as the vital experience of our times.

“Nothing Comes Before Something”: Nihilism before Nihilism

In his poem “The Calends of January in the Happily Arrived Year 1636” (“Kalendy styczniowe szczęśliwie nastęego roku 1636”), addressed to Prince Krzysztof Radziwiłł, Daniel Naborowski wrote the following: “For the pair of Something and Nothing rules on earth, / Though Nothing Comes Before Something, I believe, / For Something does not always come to be / Even when

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

305 Noica, *Devenirea întru ființa*, p. 276.

My Lord wills it so or makes decree, / While Nothing comes not just of Something, but of Nothing as well, / So that Nothing is all-powerful over all things. / Nothing in the world is the fifth element, / Which no alchemy can ever hope to equal, / For alchemy is born of metals and herbs, / While Nothing takes its power from everything.”³⁰⁶ Was Naborowski the first nihilist? Interpreting “The Calends” in the light of an idea that is the product of modern consciousness might appear rather excessive. Indeed, such an interpretation would pass over the historical context in favor of contemporary contexts, and would marginalize various other meanings of the work, given directly in the text, so as to concentrate on a brief passage instead of on the whole poem treated as a coherent semantic construction. “The Calends of January” is a poetic gift. It concludes with a concept intended to represent a paradox emphasizing the magnate’s power in contrast with the miserable condition of the poet himself. At the same time, it is a delicate request for a reward: since you have everything and lack nothing, the poem’s speaker tells its addressee, all that I can offer you is nothing (“Gracefully accept the Nothing that your meager servant gives you”³⁰⁷). However, in order that the disturbed balance between Nothing and Something might be restored, the poet adds: “And me, o great hetman, give Something / So that Something and Nothing might remain together.”³⁰⁸

Therefore, it seems that the metaphysics of “The Calends” serves the rhetoric of (or perhaps – as other passages from the poem suggest – gives hyperbolically powerful expression to) the common grumbling in Renaissance and Baroque poetry at the poor condition of the Polish-Lithuanian Republic: “Nothing from the levies, Nothing from war, Nothing from anything at all.” Nevertheless, I believe that neither the context of court poetry, nor of political poetry, exhausts the meanings of the poem, just as they are not exhausted by its references to the *vanitas* motifs so popular in the era, which we might advance here as the most immediate and obvious context. For we do not find in Naborowski’s poem the basic themes of Baroque metaphysical poetry: assertions about the vanity of the things of this world and the fragility of human existence in the face of God. And Naborowski does not use the most common

306 “Bo to dwoje Coś a Nic na świecie panuje, / Wszakże Nic moim zdaniem przed Cosiem przoduje, / Bo nie zawsze Co bywa choć z najlepszej sprawy / I zapędu pańskiego, i z rad pańskiej ławy, / Nic zaś nie tylko z Czego, lecz z Niczego będzie, / To Nic nad wszystkie rzeczy potężne jest wszędzie. / Nic na świecie ogólna piąta esencja, / Z którą nigdy nie zrówna żadna alchimija, / Bo ta z pewnych metalów, z pewnych ziół się rodzi, / A nic zaś ze wszystkiego moc swoją wywodzi.” Cf. Naborowski, Daniel, *Poezje*, ed. Jan Dür-Durski (Warszawa: PIW, 1961), p. 172.

307 “Przyjmi Nic z łaską, które chudy sługa dawa.”

308 “A mnie dla samej sfory, o wielki hetmanie, / Co daj, a tak Co i Nic pospołu zostanie.”

forms of poetic imagery for this tradition. He does not construct a dynamic, spatial vision, like Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński; he does not draw metaphysical conclusions from meditations on a specific object, as Kasper Miaskowski does in the well-known poem “On a Painted Glass” (“Na śklanicę malowaną”); he does not refer to biblical themes, as Sebastian Grabowiecki does in “Spiritual Rhythms” (“Rytmymy duchowe”); finally, he does not use allegory of the kind employed by Hieronim Morsztyn in, for instance, “Worldly Bliss” (“Światowa rozkosz”).

The language of Naborowski’s poem – particularly that of the cited passage – clearly bears some resemblance to the conceptual, “transparent” language more typical of philosophical discourse. The poet is not interested in the theological plane (the relations of God to the world, Creator to creation), nor in the existential plane (the essence of the human condition), but rather in the ontological plane – that which on the basis of the intellectual tradition referred to at the beginning of my study might be defined as an event in being itself. The two principles differentiated by the poet – Nothing and Something, nothing and being – are not equal. Indeed, the primacy of “nothing” is repeatedly and definitively emphasized. Nothing is somehow the essence of things, the scholastic fifth element, which rules over them in the form of a kind of impersonal will or power, insinuating itself into them, taking away their substantiality and permanence, treating them as a medium for its “nihilating” power, which no being is capable of opposing. Nor does the relation of Something and Nothing take the form of an atemporal permanence, nor of any cyclical or periodical exchange of positions between opposing principles. On the contrary, temporality is its essential aspect. It has a clearly marked vector: Nothing will reign where now there is Something; being will turn into nothingness. However, the reverse process never takes place. From nothing no something will ever arise, no thing, no being: *ex nihilo nihil sit*. Thus the relation between Nothing and Something is not symmetrical and there is no way of understanding it through reference to any form of dialectics that might allow for a reconciliation of the two opposing principles in a higher order. The “nihilation” of Something is a one-way, irreversible process.

The absence of God in the poem also gives pause for thought. Perhaps this absence should be considered as intentional, significant, treated as the silent condition that makes possible the whole process of the disappearance of being described in the poem. Things that God does not sustain in their continuing existence – things deprived of a metaphysical basis or foundation – must fall apart and turn into nothingness. Therefore, neither the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, the summoning into being of something from nothing, nor the idea of *creatio continua*, the continual creation and sustaining of things in their existence

performed by the power of God, can constitute barriers to a process of disintegration that touches the ontological substance of things.

Certainly it would be difficult to consider Naborowski as the first modern nihilist. However, it is also difficult to resist the impression that the Polish poet somehow captured and expressed on the threshold of modernity – though perhaps in passing and without full consciousness of the consequences of his intuitions – many of the problems that late modernity would recognize, by then in a full and developed way, as the essence of ontological nihilism. In other words, Naborowski somehow seems to anticipate the experience of the “weakening” and desubstantialization of being, treated as an inevitable, immanent process to which being and its metaphysical interpretation are submitted, and which will later seek artistic expression in weak form, and in the conception of mimesis as “tracing”, in opposition to the tradition of pure imitation.

“Impoverishment, Weakening, Disintegration”: Weak Form in Twentieth-Century Art

One of the first and clearest attempts at the artistic diagnosis of the “weak” essence of reality – and at the same time an attempt to find expression for it in the new ontology of artistic form – may be found in the practice of collage, often considered an exemplary technique of modern art.³⁰⁹ For although Apollinaire maintained that the scraps of newspaper or wood stuck into paintings underwent a process of ennoblement or sublimation in the act of artistic creation,³¹⁰ André Breton treated Picasso’s collage technique very differently: “He was looking for that which was trivial and ephemeral, wrote Breton about the great Cubist, precisely for these qualities, for themselves, and against that which more generally constitutes the object of artistic delectation and vanity. Over the passage of twenty years the scraps of newspaper yellowed, where the fresh ink had once lent a certain splendor to the beautiful *papiers collés* of 1913. Their splendor faded, and insidious stains of dampness consumed the bright colors of the blue and pinks cut-outs. The astonishing guitars made from simple slats of wood, true bridges of fortune built from day to day for a song, have not survived the crazy course of the singer. Everything happens as if Picasso had counted on

309 Nycz, Ryszard, *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze* (Warszawa: IBL, 1993), p. 190.

310 Apollinaire, Guillaume, “Malarstwo nowoczesne” (“Modern Painting”), *Artyści o sztuce. Od van Gogha do Picassa*, eds. E. Grabska and H. Morawska (Warszawa: PWN 1977), p. 135.

this impoverishment, weakening, disintegration in advance. As if in this uneven struggle – whose result never comes into doubt and which the works of human hands hold up against the elements in spite of everything – he wanted in advance to draw to himself, or attain for himself in the very process of creation, that which is valuable because it exists beyond reality.”³¹¹ Three points must be emphasized here. Firstly, the new ontology of artistic form intentionally opposes its traditional determinants – including permanence, immortality, perfection, and memory – whose places are occupied by that which does not survive, that which is marked with impermanence, destruction and withering. Secondly, the above-mentioned impoverishment, weakening and disintegration are treated autonomously. They do not take random or accidental form, but rather are inscribed as the inevitable process of destruction into the very essence of the artistic object, constituting the elements that distinguish and define it. Thirdly, this process of creation is not an expression of faith in the ability to resist, but rather of a consciousness of inevitable failure in the confrontation with the world and – as it perhaps may be interpreted – with the destructive action of time. A particular value is gained here by that which is beyond the real – perhaps meaning objects deprived of “strong” subjectivity and “thing-ness.” Therefore, the weak ontology of the work is a response to the experience of weakened being given in imperfect traces and remnants.

Precisely these very general assumptions may be found in many twentieth-century artistic theories and practices, which refer to real things (and not their artistic representations) in their materiality and physical presence, emphasizing their “low” status and their weak, broken or discarded form. We might mention here, among others, the Dadaist experiments, especially “ready-mades,” found objects (*objets-trouvés*), land art, coarse or poor art (*arte povera*), which uses impermanent materials like sand, plaster or ice with the aim of emphasizing the ephemerality of the work of art, or rather of the artistic situation,³¹² along with the so-called “weak art” (*arte debole*), which alludes directly to Vattimo’s conception. The main representatives of “weak art” – Renato Alpegiani, Ligi Antinucci, Renato Ghiazza and Giancarlo Pagliasso – use in their projects weak and shoddy objects, the remnants of things and materials.³¹³ Also close to this tradition would be Art Informel, which emphasizes materiality, coarseness, the

311 Porębski, Mieczysław, *Kubizm. Wprowadzenie do sztuki XX wieku* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1986), pp. 87-88.

312 Krakowski, Piotr, *O sztuce nowej i najnowszej* (Warszawa: PWN, 1984), pp. 119-122.

313 *Arte debole* (catalogue from 1994 exhibition in Krakow, Poland). I am grateful to Dr Monika Suma-Gawłowska from the Institute of Romance Languages at the Jagiellonian University for information about “arte debole” – as well as for information and thought-provoking reflections on the subject of Vattimo’s philosophy.

relief texture of the canvas,³¹⁴ and is sometimes described by reference to the idea of the trace or track.³¹⁵

Tadeusz Kantor's idea of the dummy and the "wreck" – the passive and discarded object – is characteristic of late-avant-garde art, particularly in its conceptions of the object and its artistic status. The wreck is the "real object" or the "object itself." Therefore, it does not fit into categories of artistic fiction understood as the illusion of reality. Nevertheless, it is an object deprived of its normal functions, and torn out of any ordinary, living context. The condition of the wreck is most fully defined precisely by its status as a trace: the wreck "is a remnant left behind after violent destruction,"³¹⁶ while "the properties of wrecks [include] unusual location, a state of abandonment, dummy-like qualities, and traces of function."³¹⁷ Therefore, the wreck is a trace of the world, the world understood as trace, and an artistic "tracing" of the world – that is, a mimesis understood not as presentation, representation, imitation, or copying, but rather as leaving and displaying the trace.

In a 1978 article entitled "Misleading Ideas" ("Pojęcia mylące"),³¹⁸ Kantor strongly juxtaposes traditional imitation with an imitation referring to such meanings as pretending, counterfeiting, or sleight of hand, while emphasizing those semantic threads of the idea that point to the "low," "shoddy," "frivolous" nature of the process of imitation and its products. Imitation (or "tracing") – identified by Kantor with the uncovering of truth in art – means precisely the creation of dummies and wrecks, things that are hollow, defective or weak.

The experience of nihilism, broadly speaking, as the weakening of the substantiality of things and being, is an essential element of the consciousness of modern literature, though it does not easily submit to categorization or unambiguous interpretation. By way of hypothesis, I am proposing here two somewhat different, though connected themes. The first, which I shall define as "the disappearance of the contents of the world" (it can be found in the works of Leśmian, Gombrowicz and Miłosz, among others), is associated with the nihilistic experience of the desubstantialization of being. The second, which I shall call the theme of "ontological junk" (it can be traced from Roman Jaworski into the works of Chwin, Stasiuk and Tulli), is associated with the idea of the trace as remnant.

314 Kotula, Andrzej and Piotr Krakowski, *Sztuka abstrakcyjna* (Warszawa: WAI, 1973), p. 239.

315 Welsch, Wolfgang, "The Birth of Postmodern Philosophy from the Spirit of Modern Art," *History of European Ideas*, 14.3 (1992), pp. 379-398.

316 Ibid.

317 Borowski, Wiesław, *Kantor* (Warszawa: WAI, 1982), p. 162.

318 Kantor, Tadeusz, *Wielopole, Wielopole. Teksty autonomiczne* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), pp. 14-16.

“The Disappearance of the Contents of the World”

Night, evening, dusk: these are among the most frequent motifs in Bolesław Leśmian's writing (as indicated even by the titles and first lines of many of his poems), filled with great expressive and symbolic potential.³¹⁹ Many of the works to be discussed here have a descriptive structure, but the images appearing within them of the falling of darkness and the coming of evening or night may also be interpreted as metaphors for disintegration, the progressive weakening of the metaphysical essence of the world and the desubstantialization of things. These images might even be interpreted – to use the title of one of Leśmian's poems – as representing the “irrevocable dusk” (P 231) of being itself. To point to just a few characteristic examples: “at night,” the gods die out (“Nocą” P 233) and “the god who was born is pushed into the abyss” (“Noc” P 301); at night things melt into “dreamy formlessness” (“Noc” P 303) or moan in death (“Noc” P 301); in the evening life is extinguished (“Wieczór” P 109) and “the heather meets its end” (“Wieczorem” P 8), while the dusk, which “comes from everywhere and nowhere,” is associated with non-being (“Idzie zmierzch od zapłotków...”). These metaphorical meanings of night and dusk are sometimes emphasized by the unusual – we might even say “metaphysical” – nature of certain elements in the evening or nocturnal landscape, which cannot be explained by natural causes: the night is somehow foreign or from another world (“Noc” P 301), while shadow has no cause in the vast expanses (“Wieczór” P 110). Finally, dusk or evening are sometimes treated as a permanent state juxtaposed with night and likened to a dying that does not lead to death or an ultimate end, but rather takes the form of a process carrying on into infinity: “Death will not be for me an eternal Night, But an eternal Evening! [...] there is no death, there never has been nor will be! There is only the coming twilight behind dark forests...” (“Wieczory” P 72). It would appear that the thesis presenting Leśmian as the poet of nothingness ought to be expanded to present him as the poet of dusk, disappearance and the weakening of being.

In “Dream” (“Sen” P 299-300), Leśmian directly named this process of the desubstantialization and weakening of being: “I dreamed that the doubtful content of the flowers was disappearing, / And that the garden, replete with leafy existence / Was dying, whispering your name o girl so eager for prophecies, / While death tore your diminutive being to shreds” (P 299).³²⁰ Interestingly, the

319 Quotations taken from the Leśmian edition, *Poezja* (Warszawa: PIW, 1979). Hereinafter the citation page number will appear in parentheses after the letter “P.”

320 “Śniło mi się, że znika treść kwiatów wątpliwa, / I że ogród, istnienia zlistwionego syt / – Ginie, szepcząc twe imię, dziewczyno wróżb chciwa / – A śmierć szarpie na strzępy twój spieszczony byt” (P 299).

process of disappearance is caused more by the tedious surfeit of existence, by its excess or “overflow,” than by its lack. The disappearance is also a total process, since it embraces all the elements of the represented world: concrete elements, like a city, forest, cloud, or cemetery, as well as those of a more general nature, more akin to metaphysical principles or foundations, such as life, eternal life, and various deities. This universal vanishing and weakening is clearly juxtaposed with the persistence of the speaker, who is the only element to preserve its being, though only so as to dream darkness. In other words, the speaker, or subject, finds himself in a situation traditionally regarded as ambiguous or intermediary: between life and death. This position is further emphasized by the object, or rather by the lack of any object for his dream. Furthermore, the price of continued existence in a world plunged into nothingness – or rather submitted to a nihilistic disintegration of the substance of things – is existential fear: “I feel unwell in the world, so terribly unwell.”³²¹ The status of the trace, which appears in the second stanza of the poem, is not entirely clear: “And the forest disappears, where its trace was irrevocably drawn by the triumphant reality of brave feet.”³²² Does it disappear together with the forest? Or does it perhaps persist as a kind of testimony to the subject’s existence – to the one “reality” that is capable of surviving in a world submitted to disappearance – and as a sign of power over the world, which the subject “impresses” and leaves on things?

One of Gombrowicz’s walks along the famous eucalyptus alley in his *Diary* ends with a description of the dusk, including some reflections that closely resemble Leśmian’s “evening” poems in character, theme and general mood: “The hour of dusk is uncanny... such a minor yet inevitable fleeing of form... It is preceded by a moment of enormous clarity, as if form itself were stubbornly resisting, not wishing to back down – and this clarity of everything is tragic, fierce and even fervent. After this moment – in which the object becomes most itself, specific, lonely and condemned to itself in solitude, deprived of the play of light and shadow it has enjoyed until now – comes an imperceptibly advancing process of weakening, an evaporation of material. Lines and dots melt together, things begin to blur in a wearying way, contours offer no resistance, fading outlines become difficult to make out, there is general withdrawal, retreat, a falling into increasing intricacy... Before the very coming of darkness form becomes stronger once again, though no longer by the power of what we see but rather by what we know about it – the cry proclaiming its

321 “I tak mi źle na wiecie, tak mi strasznie źle.”

322 “I las znika, gdzie lad swj wyrla niezbicie zwyciska rzeczywistoc moich dzielnych stp.”

presence is now purely theoretical... After this mixing together of all things, blackness comes pouring out of holes, thickening within space itself. Material becomes darkness... Nothing. Night.”³²³ The scene described by Gombrowicz may be interpreted – much like Leśmian’s descriptions of the night or the dusk – in two ways. We might interpret it literally, as an image of the world, owing its extraordinary intensity, fullness, reality and authenticity to its “liminality” or suspension on the verge of day and night. We might also interpret it metaphorically, as a figure for the “retreat” of being and its departure into nothingness, a state of suspension between two orders: ontological fullness and lack. In order to capture this almost inexpressible moment of “transition,” Gombrowicz meticulously assembles semantically similar expressions (which also resemble Leśmian’s metaphors): weakening, evaporation, fleeing, falling away, withdrawal, retreat. Language and meaning here do not so much fulfill a referential function or serve to name things and the subject’s experience; rather, they attempt to “cover” an ontological lack or void, as well as to sustain the weakening link between the human being and the world. The reaction of the subject confronted with the “weakening” of being also seems to be similar in both Gombrowicz and Leśmian. The subject of “Dream” speaks about his own solitude in the universe. The subject of *Diary* speaks about the radical alienation of the human order from the order of nature, which is no longer a “home” providing human beings with a sense of rootedness, but rather resembles the Heideggerian *Abgrund*.

Miłosz’s “*Oeconomia Divina*” has been frequently interpreted in the context of the opposition between chaos and order – either as a poem expressing the disintegration of a world devoid of ontological consistency³²⁴ or in an eschatological context as a work addressing the problem of the erosion of meaning and the sphere of transcendence, together with the far-reaching consequences of this fact.³²⁵ The poem may also be read in a nihilistic or “weak ontological” context, as a statement of the desubstantialization of things: “Out of trees, field stones, even lemons on the table, / Materiality escaped and their spectrum / Proved to be a void, a haze on a film. / Dispossessed of its objects, space was swarming.”³²⁶ However, the similarities between Miłosz’s poem and

323 Gombrowicz, Witold, *Dziennik*, Volume 2 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997), pp. 43-44.

324 Prokop, Jan, “Antynomie Miłosza,” *Poznawanie Miłosza*, ed. Jerzy Kwiatkowski (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1985), p. 236.

325 Fiut, Aleksander, “W obliczu końca świata,” *Poznawanie Miłosza*, p. 187.

326 “Z drzew, polnych kamieni, nawet cytryn na stole / Uciekła materialność i widmo ich / Okazywało się pustką, dymem na kliszy.” Cf. Miłosz, Czesław, *Poezje Wybrane – Selected Poems* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1996), pp. 225-225

Leśmian's and Gombrowicz's texts clearly come to an end with this diagnosis, as do any similarities with weak ontology in general. In the works of the latter two writers, weakening is an ontological event affecting being itself – with its source in being's internal condition rather than in any external force or action. In Miłosz's writings, weakening is a theological event, and is thus treated not as the death or departure of God, but as a kind of punishment directed against human beings by the "Lord of Hosts" – as His sovereign act. The speakers of Leśmian's poem and Gombrowicz's *Diary*, though they feel loneliness and alienation in the face of "weak" reality, clearly exist *within* the experience described as the disappearance or evaporation of the contents of the world – an experience they treat as their own. The speaker of Miłosz's poem clearly distances himself from this experience ("I did not expect to live in such an unusual moment"³²⁷). Miłosz also strongly emphasizes the specific context in which the process of the "weakening" of reality is taking place. In Leśmian's "Dream," this process plays out in a place closer to an undefined, cosmic space and time, thus bearing the traits of a universality also underlined by oneiric convention. In Gombrowicz's case, the process is strongly located in a specific moment and place, but it occurs on an existential level, playing out between the lone individual and disappearing being. Miłosz, on the other hand, clearly roots the act of the "weakening" of things in a civilizational context. It is not only natural beings that succumb to disintegration, but also the synecdoches of modern civilization – "Roads on constant pillars, cities of glass and cast iron, / Airfields larger than tribal dominions"³²⁸ – along with the sense-creating and communicative power of language and art: "Letters in books turned silver-pale, wobbled, and faded."³²⁹

"Tracing the Traces"

In twentieth-century Polish literature, perhaps the first manifestation of weak ontology based on the category of the trace can be found in Roman Jaworski's *Count Orgaz's Wedding (Wesele hrabiego Orgaza)*: "For a story is not the arranging of the eternal traces of life according to free human projection, but the tracing of the traces of a grand life of exorbitant construction."³³⁰ This sentence – pronounced by one of the novel's main characters, Yetemejer, in reference to a

327 "Nie myślałem, że żyć będę w tak osobliwej chwili."

328 "...drogi na betonowych słupach, miasta ze szkła i żeliwa, lotniska rozleglejsze niż plemienne państwa."

329 "Literey ksiąg srebrniały, chwiały się i nikły."

330 Jaworski, Roman, *Wesele hrabiego Orgaza* (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), p. 36.

collection of art works belonging to his adversary, Havemejer – may serve as an illustration of the trace-like, “weak conception” of being, here expressed *avant la lettre* via artistic intuition. It also allows the basic indicators of mimesis as “tracing” to be determined. For it expresses the conviction that a reality independent of human knowledge exists, a reality transcendent with respect to man – an autonomous “construction” of being. However, this construction can neither be understood, nor comprehensively, completely or confidently represented. Being is given only in the traces, signs, and relicts it leaves behind, much like the cultural tradition allegorically represented by the palace belonging to the main character of *Count Orgaz’s Wedding*: “It is like an illustrative museum, where the traces of a glorious past are stored away, clearly showing how any cultivation of thoughts in the service of others must inevitably end. Magnificent relicts of wise religions that have disappeared without a trace, since their creator did not think them through for himself. The foundation of epoques and histories, cracked in half and disfigured with the bloody traces of a silent madness: thoughts of martyrdom.”³³¹

However, the formula “tracing the traces” may reveal a conception of art different both from the traditional mimetic model and from the constructionist (modern) one. This formulation treats artistic activity not merely as an attempt to copy reality, nor as an attempt to impose upon it any “strong” subjective constructions, but rather as a constant rereading and reinterpreting of the objectively existing traces of the world, life, being, and tradition, as well as an arranging of their stories, a telling about them and responding to them – or perhaps even directly answering them – with one’s own trace.

Another important source of “ontological junk” or the defective reality – certainly a more influential source on later literature than Jaworski’s prose – may also be found in certain tendencies within Polish literature of the 1930s. This literature often examines that which is marginal, peripheral, liminal, monstrous or grotesque – for instance, Gombrowicz’s and – particularly – Schulz’s prose. In “The Street of Crocodiles,” Schulz was perhaps the first to recognize the strong link between modernity and the weakening of reality. This reality takes on a “half-baked, imitative, illusory, undecided”³³² form in a suspicious commercial district apparently serving as a synecdoche for modern life.

331 Jaworski, p. 106.

332 Schulz, *Fictions*, p. 75. This quality is also apparent in “Tailors’ Dummies,” where Schulz treated the act of secondary creation as a calling into being of a defective reality: “We openly admit: we shall not insist either on durability or solidity of workmanship; our creations will be temporary, to serve for a single occasion” (Schulz, *Fictions*, p. 41). He treated it as a separate, autonomous realm of being, and not simply as a copy, a reflection of an original or archetype: “But the resemblance, the pretence, the name

Weak ontology, along with the closely related motif of the trace (in the sense of the remnant or relict), also occupy an essential place in Polish literature over the last decade. However, these themes do not allow themselves to be organized into any coherent or unambiguous categories, since they appear in diverse contexts and with various functions, and are problematized in various ways. We might take three texts as prime examples: Stefan Chwin's *A Brief History of a Certain Joke* (*Krótką historia pewnego żartu*), Magdalena Tulli's *Flaw*, and Andrzej Stasiuk's *On the Road to Babadag* (*Jadąc do Babadag*).

The child narrator of *A Brief History* compares the ideologized world that surrounds him to the rarefied substance of cotton candy, thus emphasizing its incompatibility with common sense, its paradoxical or even aporetic nature, its suspension between being and non-being: "For the cotton candy somehow was and at the same time was not. But can something be and not be simultaneously? My mind was once again faced with difficult questions. [...] Everything seemed to be unreal – made of cardboard or plywood. Even scouting orders and stripes."³³³ However, Chwin's narrator does not doubt that under this world the truth, or "strong reality," is somehow concealed, while the task of his narrative is to reach it, or extract it, from the various incompatible and even contradictory accounts or traces.³³⁴ These traces are largely wounds left behind on people or things, as well as scraps and shabby objects marked by disintegration, broken apart, difficult to encapsulate or identify: "The invisible ones left behind only traces, sad and meager [...] So the traces dispersed and faded."³³⁵ The status of

reassures us and stops us from asking what that unfortunate figure is in itself and by itself" (Ibid., p. 43). This weakening of material is, much like in Leśmian's "Dream," more a result of excess, of "infinite fertility" (p. 39), than of the disappearance or depletion of being. Instead, it is more of a "liberation" from the excessive burden of substantiality: "Ah, what relief it would be for the world to lose some of its contents" (p. 38). Michał Piętiewicz has written about weak ontology in Schulz's writings in an unpublished undergraduate thesis entitled "Proza Brunona Schulza w kontekście mitu i kiczu," defended at the Jagiellonian University in 2006.

333 Chwin, Stefan, *Krótką historia pewnego żartu* (*Sceny z Europy Środkowowschodniej*) (Kraków: Oficyna Literacka, 1991), pp. 182, 186.

334 In Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation to an Execution*, reality is also frequently compared to junk, imitation, fakery, though the conclusion of the novel seems to suggest that the hero ultimately frees himself from the world of illusion in the moment of his death.

335 Ibid., pp. 18, 20. It appears that Chwin would be close to the following claim from the narrator of Czesław Miłosz's *The Issa Valley* (*Dolina Issy*): "Nobody lives alone: he converses with those who have passed before him, their lives are incarnated in him, he walks in their footsteps and visits the corners of the house of history in their traces. From their hopes and failures, from the signs they have left behind them, whether it be no more than a single letter carved into a stone, comes his calmness and restraint in pronouncing

the traces is admittedly “weak” and incomplete, but they are the only form of the Other’s existence, the only incontrovertible evidence of its existence. However, this existence inescapably belongs to the past, never to return (unlike the classic conceptions of the memory trace, which forms a guarantee of re-presentation), so that it becomes a task for memory and narrative instead.

Ontological aporeticity also marks the reality presented in Tulli’s *Flaw*, where that which exists mingles with that which is not in a world of junk and imitation – a world incapable of existing.³³⁶ However, in Tulli’s case, this defective or “weak” surface does not conceal any “second bottom” or genuine, “strong” reality beneath it. There is only a “hole” into which everything disappears: “This depth is pure illusion, paint and plywood, nothing more.”³³⁷ Since no single, true version of reality exists, one might say that “from a certain point of view there are no made-up stories” and that the only reality is composed of meandering narratives overlapping with one another and succumbing to a kind of “slackness.” All these narratives can only ever refer to other narratives, as if in a form of bricolage – as material used again and again to build new wholes, always bearing the “traces of use” from earlier contexts and applications.³³⁸

Andrzej Stasiuk would appear to represent the most interesting case for the purposes of this study. For instance, he treated the motif of defective, shoddy, weakened, unrealized reality richly and from many perspectives in *On the Road to Babadag*, where it takes on a particular meaning as the key to the description of Central European reality and the specific experience of being, time and space in this part of the world – entirely different from the ordered, solid reality of Western Europe: “There are houses, there are streets, but they are only sketches, barely formed improvisations, with the sadness of a material that has frozen half way to fulfillment, weakened in a middle form [...] This is a specialty of my part of the world: the ceaseless disappearance mingling with growth, the cunning not-quite-development, which turns everything into a waiting game, the reluctance to experiment on one’s own body, the eternal idleness that allows one to jump onto the bank of the time’s stream and for action to be replaced by contemplation. Everything new here has been counterfeited, and only after it ages, spoils, decays and crumbles does it take on any meaning. [...] Well then,

judgment on himself” (Cf. Miłosz, Czesław. *Dolina Issy* [Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1980], p. 75). For Zbigniew Herbert too, material traces are a guarantee of contact with the past (Cf. Herbert, Zbigniew, *Labirynt nad morzem* [Warszawa: PIW, 2000], p. 29).

336 Tulli, Magdalena, *Skaza* (Warszawa: W.A.B, 2006), pp. 174, 10, 16.

337 *Ibid.*, pp. 127-128.

338 *Ibid.*, pp. 163, 169, 60, 80.

there's no hiding the fact that what interests me is disappearance, disintegration and everything that is not as it could be, or as it ought to be."³³⁹

The titular formula of this sub-chapter of my study – “tracing the traces” – accurately characterizes the way in which Stasiuk treats the trace in *On the Road to Babadag*, except perhaps that instead of “tracing” we ought instead to speak of “inventing.” The world is given to the narrator in the form of traces, but these are not the irrefutable testimony of some reality (of culture, tradition, otherness) in its past or historical dimension. On the contrary, they emphasize the impermanence of things, which disappear without a trace and leave no trace behind. Moreover, as the “scraps of the present,” they creatively constitute the existence of the subject, for whom temporal depth has succumbed to a flattening and whose only temporal dimension is a persistence in the “present perfect tense,” liquidating the real succession of events and transforming them into the “eternal now” of the narrative.³⁴⁰ According to Stasiuk, imitation is not the copying of a “strong,” pre-

339 Stasiuk, Andrzej, *Jadąc do Babadag* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2004), pp. 194, 226, 247. Stasiuk alludes in his images of Romania – the country that forms his favorite example and is in a certain sense a synecdoche for the whole of Mitteleuropa – to two sources. Firstly, he refers to Jerzy Stempowski's *Rubis d'Orient*, in which impermanence and provisionality – inscribed into the manner of organizing time and space, as well as into human gestures and behavior – are raised to the level of a distinguishing characteristic of the historical and cultural experience of Romania and the whole of Central Europe. On the other hand, he refers to models developed by Romanian culture itself, especially to Emil Cioran (the hero of Stempowski's essay), whose historico-philosophical and existential pessimism inherits much older traditions, especially the fatalistic-vanity themes of Old Romanian literature (Neagoie Basarab's *Învațaturile* and Miron Costin's *Viața lumii*). However, the most immediate context for Stasiuk's vision would appear to be Noica's ontology, with its emphasis on the weak experience of reality, treated as a “local ontology” or an expression of the “Romanian experience of being.” Noica's conception of the modality of being might even be referred to the following description, from *On the Road to Babdag*, of a place called Sfântu Gheorge: “In Sfântu Gheorge anything at all could happen. I was certain of that at around seven thirty when the guests arrived at the tables. There are certain places in which there is nothing but potentiality” (p. 204).

340 Stasiuk, *Jadąc do Babadag*, pp. 96, 247, 261, 264, 283, 70, 247. Dorota Kozicka writes interestingly about the specific characteristics of the narration in *On the Road to Babadag*, especially its fragmentary, vestigial and “surface” nature in the context of experience, understanding and representation, in the following articles: “Podróżny horyzont rozumienia,” *Teksty Drugie* 1.2 (2006), especially pp. 282-284; “‘Nie ma nic na końcu książki?’ – O literaturze niefikcjonalnej ostatnich lat,” *Narracje po końcu (wielkich) narracji. Kolekcje, obiekty, symulakra...*, eds. H. Gosk and A. Zieniewicz (Warszawa: Elipsa, 2007); “Podróże kształcą? Doświadczenie podróży w literaturze

existing reality. Neither is it an uncovering of the traces of the other or a marching in those traces. Instead, it is a constantly renewed gesture of making contact with a disappearing world: “In the darkness of life I ought to be able to make out a single trace, which in some miraculous way would transform into fate, into something that might be imitated, into something that might bring comfort. But nothing comes of this.”³⁴¹ Therefore, in Stasiuk’s world, there is no place for mourning, nostalgia, or the modernist sublime either,³⁴² but rather for Heideggerian *Andenken*, for thinking as the remembrance of absent being, which Vattimo juxtaposes with representation. Above all, this situation calls for invention, “the production of being as new meanings of experience,”³⁴³ or for the “invention of the Other,” to use Derrida’s formulation.³⁴⁴

The author of *Fado*, in contrast with Chwin, does not seek to find beneath the “weak” surface (in Chwin’s case this simply means “false” surface) any “strong” reality justifying the meaning of the narrative act as a tracing of the real version of events (or at least an aspiration to do so). Stasiuk does not seek a “strong reality,” which – guaranteed by the physical presence of its traces – might itself form a basis for being. Spinning a narrative about the world in *On the Road to Babadag* and *Fado* is possible – much like in Tulli’s *Flaw* – precisely because the “strong” version of the world has fallen apart, while the world itself has come to resemble a literary fiction in which anything can happen.³⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the reality of narratives deprived of any reference to anything beyond themselves is not the only reality available in *On the Road to Babadag*, a fact which is suggested by the frequent appearance in the book of metaphors of the crack, the rupture, or the permeability of being, all of which are semantically related to the trace (particularly in Polish). These metaphors allow for the work of the imagination and of memory. They allow the lid of nothingness to be raised, and the world to be viewed from a different angle.³⁴⁶ In fact, this set of metaphors is highly ambiguous and difficult to interpret, as they seem to suggest the existence of a space independent of the mediations of

najnowszej” (paper presented at the *Literackie reprezentacje doświadczenia* conference, which took place in Sobieszewo in September 2006).

341 Stasiuk, *Jadąc do Babadag*, p. 227.

342 Vattimo, *Dialogo con Nietzsche*, p. 271.

343 See: Vattimo, Gianni, “History of Salvation, History of Interpretation,” *After Christianity*, trans. Luca d’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

344 See: Derrida, Jacques, *Psyche. Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Galilee, 1987).

345 Stasiuk, Andrzej, *Fado* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2006), pp. 84. See also, Stasiuk, *Jadąc do Babadag*, pp. 225-226. Stasiuk’s narratives are also chaotic, incoherent and have been compared with pure dissembling (*Jadąc do Babadag* p. 216).

346 Stasiuk, *Jadąc do Babadag*, pp. 106, 181, 221.

experience – in other words, independent of that which is narrated or imagined. However, this space does not take the form of any “other side,” depth, foundation or truth concealed beneath what is apparent and incidental, and accessible in an act of insight or epiphany. Perhaps the best context through which to explain the metaphors of the crack is the idea of the “rift”³⁴⁷ from Heidegger’s essay, *The Origin of the Work of Art*. For Heidegger, the rift represents conflict or strife, while also being the place of the joining and mutual belonging of earth and world, of what is uncovered and open, what is concealed and closed.³⁴⁸ This “rift” is the place where we should situate both the trace and weak being: the “fragile nature” (*frageda fire*), which – according to Noica – is that which falls outside the opposition between the “gravity of being” (*gravitatea ființei*) and nothingness or the absurd.³⁴⁹

Therefore, in conclusion, we might ask whether the literary texts analyzed here – along with the metaphors of disappearance, weakening, the trace and the rupture – may be situated within the context of nihilism and “weak ontology”. An affirmative answer is easy here if we accept Vattimo’s conception of nihilism as the weakening, dematerialization, and desubstantialization of things, according to which things “disperse” into transmitted traditions or narratives.³⁵⁰ However, the answer is not so clear when we turn to the Heideggerian understanding of nihilism as the erasure (of being by beings) that has taken place within the history of metaphysics.³⁵¹ Here, weakening might be understood precisely as the possibility of the return (though not in the sense of any return of a “strong” version) of a being that has been obscured and erased by objects (a being that, according to Noica, is an absence or void in things³⁵²). In this way, weakening might be understood as a harbinger of the potential overcoming of nihilism described in the writings of the very originator of the nihilist question in twentieth-century culture – Friedrich Nietzsche. After all, in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche himself wrote that nihilism was already “behind, outside himself.”³⁵³

³⁴⁷Translator’s note: David Farrell Krell uses the word “rift” to translate Heidegger’s German “*Riss*” into English. The word “*Riss*” may also be translated as “mark” or perhaps even “trace.” The Polish word “*ryśa*” – clearly etymologically related to the German word – shares a similar semantic field. These connections – which are important to the thought of both Heidegger and Andrzej Zawadzki – are not easily conveyed in English.

348 Heidegger, Martin, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 188.

349 Noica, *Sentimental românesc al ființei*, p. 6.

350 Vattimo, *Koniec nowoczesności*, p. 25.

351 Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Volume 2, p. 354.

352 Noica, *Devenirea întru ființa*, pp. 197, 199.

353 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 3.

“The Generosity of the Trace”: On Leśmian’s “Snow”

Motto:

“He jumped a puddle where two dung-beetles had fastened onto a straw, getting in each other’s way, and printed his sole on the edge of the road: a highly significant footprint, ever looking upward and ever seeing him who has vanished.”

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*³⁵⁴

The passage from Nabokov’s novel refers to the theme of the footprint – in other words, the trace of a human foot.³⁵⁵ As I have mentioned, this theme is already present in ancient literature (Aesychlus’s *Libation Bearers*). It was also known to Plato, who refers to it in the *Theaetetus* in his reflections on the problem of the memory trace. Plato links the memory trace with the possibility of creating in memory an image or representation (*eikon*) of that which has been seen or experienced in the past – and thus of recreating or summoning an original, directly given presence. Nabokov perceptively shows the changes that modern literature – as well as twentieth-century philosophy – have forced upon traditional understandings of the trace, especially those understandings related to the trace as “imprint” or “*typos*.” Despite the fact that, in Plato’s thought, the order of the trace is prior to the order of representation – as Ricoeur points out in his reading of the *Theaetetus*³⁵⁶ – the leaving of a trace or impression in the clay tablet of memory appears to guarantee re-presentation and return. In other words, it guarantees the renewed appearance of that which left the trace behind – and in self-identical and unchanged form. The situation is markedly different in Nabokov’s *The Gift*. A man – in fact, it is the main protagonist of the novel – has certainly left a trace behind, but he has disappeared and will never return to the same place. It is difficult not to connect this disappearance of the subject with what the novel says about the very imprint and its form. The trace becomes ambiguous, almost gaining a kind of autonomy and separating itself from the presence of the man who left it. It no longer serves a mere repetition of presence, but liberates within itself a semantic energy that cannot be limited to

354 Nabokov, Vladimir, *The Gift*, trans. Michael Scammell (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 78.

355 Translator’s Note: The connection is much more explicit in Polish since the phrase for “footprint” (“*ślad stopy*”) contains the word “trace” (“*ślad*”). Unfortunately, the word “foot-trace” does not exist in English.

356 Ricoeur, Paul, *La memoire, L’histoire, L’oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), p. 15.

the creation of a frozen, static image or representation. Instead, it can be interpreted in multiple ways. Moreover, the trace becomes active, thus occupying in a certain sense the status of the subject. It is not the person who seeks the traces – returning or walking in the tracks – but rather the trace itself that watches the person and tracks him. The trace that tracks – this apparently paradoxical expression surely represents more than a mere play on words, or etymological construction. But how might we interpret the disturbing and ambiguous presence of a trace that remains while the person disappears? Several different contexts would appear to be justified and useful here. First of all, we might examine the existential context, which would point to the impossibility of taking control of the past, of returning to a past “I” that comprises a whole range of scattered and momentary imprints still weighing and acting *ex post* upon the present. We might also consider the ethical context, in which the imprint might constitute a kind of warning. Specifically, this context would point to the necessity of taking responsibility for the traces left behind, thus forming a kind of ethical tribunal to scrutinize and judge our responses. However, I would like to reflect here on the question of the trace in the context of a problem traditionally defined as mimetic. This context implies an acceptance of the ethical perspective, while attempting to reconstruct what might be provisionally termed an “aesthetics of the trace and tracing.” This attempt also assumes certain ontological and epistemological negotiations. To illustrate my theses, I shall refer here to Bolesław Leśmian’s poem, “Snow”

Bolesław Leśmian, *Śnieg*

Pamiętam ów ruchliwie rozblyskany szron
 I śniegu ociężałe w gałęziach nawiesie,
 I jego nieustanny z drzew na ziemię zron,
 I uczucie, że w słońcu razem z śniegiem skrzę się.

A on ciągle narastał, tu w kopiec, tam-w stos,
 I drzewom białych czupryn coraz to dokładał,
 Ślepił oczy i łechtał podbródek i nos,
 I fruwał-i tkwił w próżni-i bujał i padał.

I pamiętam ów niski, pół zapadły dom,
 I za szybami włóczek różnobarwne wzory.
 Kto tam mieszkał? Pytanie-czy człowiek, czy gnom?
 Byłem dzieckiem. Śnieg bielą zasnuwał przestwory.

Dotknąłem dłonią szyby, mimo strachu mąk,
 I uczułem ślad hojny, niby czarów zbytek.
 Tą dłonią dotykałem mych sprzętów i ksiąg,

I niańki, by ją oddać na baśni użytek.

Serce marło, gdym w dłoni unosił ten ślad
W ciszę śniegu, co prósząc, weselił się w niebie.
Śnieg ustał-i minęło odtąd tyle lat,
Ile trzeba, by ślady zatracić do siebie.

Jakże pragnąłbym dzisiaj, gdy swe bóle znam,
Stać, jak wówczas, przed domu wpół zapadłą bramą
I widzieć, jak śnieg ziemię obielea ten sam,
Śnieg, co fruwa i buja tak samo.

Z jakimż płaczem bym zajrzał-niepoprawny śniarz-
Do szyby, by swą młodość odgrzebać w jej szronie-
Z jakąż mocą bym tulił uznojoną twarz
W te dawne, com je stracił, w te dziecięce dłonie!

Bolesław Leśmian, "Snow"³⁵⁷

I remember the brightly flaring sparks of frost
And the heavy hanging snow in the branches,
And the ceaseless sprinkle from tree to ground,
The sense I was sparkling in the sun with the snow.

And the snow rose ever higher: here a mound, there a heap,
Piling in poised white caps of hair on the trees,
Blinding my eyes, tickling my chin and nostrils,
Floating suspended in the void, rising and falling.

And I remember a low, half-abandoned house,
Behind its windows multicolored patterns of wool.
Who lived there? That was the question: man or gnome?
I was a child. The snow cloaked the empty vastness in white.

I touched the pane with my hand, despite torments of fear,
And I felt the generous trace, like an excess of enchantment.
With that hand I had touched all my things and my books,
And my nanny – to give her a fairy-tale look.

My heart froze when I bore the trace in my hand

357 Translator's Note: This English translation of the poem is intentionally literal. This is partly because Zawadzki's specific interpretations require the preservation of various phrases from the Polish in literal form. Leśmian is also notoriously "untranslatable" – hence the dearth of English translations of his work.

Into the quiet of the falling snow, making merry in the sky.
 The snow has ceased and since then as many years have gone by
 As were needed to lose all those traces of myself.

How I would wish today, when I know my pains,
 To stand as then before the ramshackle gate of the house,
 And see the same snow whitening the earth,
 The snow floating and flying in the same way.

With such tears would I peer through the window,
 An incurable dreamer, to dig out my youth from the frost,
 With such ardor would I press my exhausted face
 Into those bygone hands I had lost – into those childish hands!

On first reading, “Snow” appears to represent yet another variant on the motif of the return to childhood or youth. The poem describes an attempt – though in this case the task is impossible, futile, or at least very difficult – to restore one’s own self from many years before, an effort to make contact with a lost time and world. Nevertheless, it seems that another meaning may lie under this first and undoubtedly important narrative layer. Specifically, this meaning may refer above all to questions of the trace and of the image or representation, as well as to the mutual relations of these two categories and perhaps even to the very status of reality itself.

Within the poem we can differentiate two quite clearly outlined and – as I shall attempt to demonstrate later in my argument – strongly divided, or even opposed, temporal and existential planes. The first of these is the broadly outlined “past,” which dominates in the first five stanzas. The poem does not give us any detailed information as to when or where the retrospectively described scene took place, nor the location of the house in front of which the protagonist once stood. We know only that the whole event occurred in winter. The lyric speaker or protagonist of the poem is not precisely described. The speaker emphasizes only the fact that the “past” means the time when he was a child, which is juxtaposed with the present, “today” – the current emotional and existential state of the subject, to which the last two stanzas refer. The thrice-used conditional mood – “I would wish,” “would I look” and “would I press” – seems to emphasize the uncertain and open character of the subject’s current condition, suspended between desire and the possibility of its fulfillment or realization. Therefore, we can differentiate two “scenes” or events in the poem: the primal, original scene and the derivative scene, which is a re-creation, or rather an attempt at re-creation.

Three realms of the subject’s experience and reflection dominate his “now,” thereby delineating the fundamental aspects of his existential condition, and

significantly differentiating the present from the recalled past. The first of these realms is memory. The phrase “I remember” – which begins the poem and is further strengthened by its repetition at the beginning of the third stanza – forms the general frame for the whole work, as well as the axis around which the fundamental opposition between the temporal and existential planes is constructed. Therefore, the action of the entire poem represents a dramatized scene of memory, though two points must be emphasized here. First of all, the act of remembering is not the same as a momentary, epiphanic “flash” or “revelation” taking the speaker directly into the past and guaranteeing either the possibility of its retrieval or the unity of the subject’s past and present experience (as in the case of Proust’s madeleines). Instead, it forms an intricate, developed and complex narrative procedure³⁵⁸ – more of a dwelling upon than a pure moment of memory, more of a process than an act. In “Snow,” memory attains narrative form, as the speaker attempts to arrange all the elements of his account into a coherent whole. Secondly, the emotional aura accompanying the recollection is not joyful, gentle, or pleasant. It is not accompanied by any satisfaction gained from a return to the past or by any joy at the retrieval of some fragment of it. Instead, the emotional aura is clearly melancholic, traumatic, and marked by unexplained pain and suffering, which have imprinted themselves distinctly on the subject’s “then” and “now,” as on both his past and present experience.

Memory is also closely linked with two other essential experiences: the attainment of self-knowledge and desire. This connection is heavily emphasized in the sixth stanza. Knowing oneself, self-knowledge or being self-conscious are linked here with suffering (“I know my pains”). Admittedly, neither their origin nor character are clearly defined here, though we might guess that they are linked with an adulthood and maturity contrasted with a lost youth of happiness, as well as with the finitude of the human condition, knowledge of its limitations, the impossibility of realizing desires, and a sense of unfulfillment. This desire is not so much a misty, sentimental dream about a return to childhood, but rather a much more radical desire for repetition, a desire for the same, which is closely linked with the problem of representation. Here the speaker of the poem wishes to stand in the same place where he once stood, and to see the same thing he once saw. Thus, he desires to create an ideal representation, an exact copy, which will constitute a doubling of an original presence, and from which any difference will be excluded. This perfect “identity” – strengthened further by the

358 Michał Głowiński has written about the narrational quality of Leśmian’s poetry. Cf. Głowiński, Michał, “Zaświat przedstawiony: Szkice o poezji Bolesława Leśmian,” *Prace wybrane*, Volume 4 (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), p. 206.

epiphorical placement of the same word in two consecutive lines (“the same snow,” “the same way”) – concerns the entire “original event,” though it affects one element most strongly – the snow.

Indeed, the element of the snow appears to fulfill a special role on various levels of the poem’s construction. The significance of this motif is further emphasized by its placement in the poem’s title. The image of snow and its falling occupy most of the first two stanzas. Ultimately, it is from the snow that the process of recollection begins – along with the speaker’s entire narration. The description of the snow is detailed and developed, drawing attention to its dynamic and progressive character. The dynamics of the image are attained through a combination of several rhetorical figures – amplification, gradation, as well as hyperbole – which summon up in the reader’s imagination the suggestive effect of a rising and expanding bank of snow, the circulation and movement of the snowflakes, apparently in parallel and simultaneous with the narrative process and the unfolding discourse. Nevertheless, this rich description – concentrated on visual aspects – does not serve the purpose of capturing the object and its permanent, substantial characteristics. On the contrary, it serves precisely to reveal the object’s changeability and motion, which are emphasized by visual deception and hindered vision – the flaring and sparkling of the snow. The snow is a screen concealing everything else and making representation of the reality in which the speaker finds himself impossible – “blinding the eyes” and covering “the empty vastness in white.”³⁵⁹ Sight or vision – associated with the desire to make present and to bring about the return of the same – will appear only in the later sections of the text, which refer to the speaker’s present dimension.³⁶⁰

Distance from the object – which forms a condition for its representation – is replaced here by participation in that object. The snow is not treated as a threat; on the contrary, it gives a feeling of peace and security. The snow is a protective shield surrounding and embracing the speaker from all sides. He encounters it through the sense of touch, which implies a certain directness of sensation (“tickling my chin and nose”). The boundaries dividing the human being from the snow piling up around him lose their clarity. The masterful

359 Głowiński describes the snow in Leśmian’s poem as a symbol for what veils and divides (p. 255). Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska (“Gdzie umieścić Leśmiana,” *Studia o Leśmianie*, eds. M. Głowiński and J. Sławiński [Warszawa: 1976], p. 30) draws attention to the “motion” of the visual impressions in the author’s works: their flickering, flaring and sparkling.

360 Głowiński sees things differently, drawing attention to the “past/today” opposition as fundamental to a poetic drama playing out in memory, which connects desire and presence, vision and the past (pp. 251, 255).

alliteration in the last line of the first stanza – “I was sparkling in the sun with the snow” (“w słońcu razem z śniegiem skrzę się”) – strengthens the speaker’s feeling that he is not separated from the world around him. On the contrary, he identifies with it, a fact which comprises an inseparable particle of the reality in which he is immersed. The white of the snow, which suggests void, boundlessness, the disappearance of things, simultaneously represents fullness, the subject’s participation in the world and the non-existence of a border between the “I” and the world. The price of this fullness is not only the aforementioned exclusion of representation, but also the exclusion of language. In the fifth stanza, the snow is clearly associated with silence.

In the past – in the subject’s primal, originary experience – there is no place for memory, but neither is there any place for the desire and consciousness that characterize the “now” of the poem’s speaker, or subject. The subject of the “primal event” has not yet been separated from the world. He does not feel the pain and torn identity that characterize his present existence. Therefore, the distance and difference indispensable to the subject’s self-constitution in differentiation from an object simply do not exist. The subject can have no consciousness of such a separation, and thus desire cannot come into existence, since desire is precisely conditioned by consciousness of the lack of an object – or separation from it.

Therefore, we might say that the dichotomy between the two sections of the poem is constructed on the basis of the following oppositions: an original presence and an attempt to recreate it through memory; the participation of the “I” in the world and the consciousness of a split between the “I” and the world; lack of desire and desire; silence and speech; blindness and vision. These oppositions also point to a dialectical understanding of the poem’s speaker, or subject, suspended between irreconcilable oppositions. The common denominator for all these oppositions appears to be the problem of the relation between the thing and its representation.

In my view, the very axis of the compositional, temporal and intellectual structure of the poem runs through the third, fourth and fifth stanzas. Though narrated in the past tense and formally belonging to the speaker’s past, they constitute a kind of bridge between the two “scenes” – the original and the derivative. Moreover, these stanzas – especially the fifth – explicitly link the past and the present, showing that what took place in the first of the temporal dimensions has had lasting consequences in the second: “many years have gone by.” The third stanza introduces a clear and important change into the narration. The description of the snow dominating the first two stanzas slips into the background, while a strange and mysterious house becomes the center of attention. This house does not resemble any solid, well constructed homestead.

Instead, it seems to be neglected and ruined, falling in on itself, barely rising out of its surroundings. Similarly, its appearance in the poem is not justified by any chain of preceding incidents – for instance, on the basis of any causal or functional relation. The appearance of the house is not explained by the narration, nor even prepared or introduced. On the contrary, the house's appearance is decidedly sudden and unexpected. We might even say that it *occurs* randomly: the house springs up before the protagonist from nowhere, forcing its bulk upon him. Yet this occurrence also constitutes precisely the true *event* central to the whole poem – the event the narration wants to name and which memory wants to recreate and represent. As he stands in front of the house, the speaker of the poem asks himself: who lives in it? Who or what is hiding inside? What mysterious presence from the human world – or perhaps even from the non-human world – is concealed behind its windows and woolen curtains? The speaker's question is not exclusively rhetorical, but also ontological. As Noica suggests, being may remain in suspension – contradictory and indeterminate – when it is treated not as an answer but as a question.³⁶¹ This question remains unanswered, though the solution to the riddle is clearly something crucial and of vital interest to the protagonist. This is suggested by the fact that, despite the passing of many years, he still feels a vague sense of guilt. The speaker tries to excuse his ignorance and apparent inability to reach the truth by citing extenuating circumstances: the fact that he was a child and that snow was falling, making it impossible to see. In other words, what the poem is really “about” – the main motif setting into motion the mechanisms of memory, desire and narrative – is neither lost childhood nor the titular snow. In fact, we might even say that the poem is “about” what it neither represents nor names: that which is hiding inside behind the window, that which is absent.

So what does “Snow” speak about, and how should we interpret it? A potential key to reading the poem is provided by the Lyotardean conception of the sublime, according to which the modernist work of art makes allusions to the unrepresentable, while giving some enjoyment by means of a coherent, assimilable artistic form. Looking at it from this perspective, Leśmian's poem would be the representation of a situation of unrepresentability, a narration about the impossibility of narration.³⁶² An equally useful alternative might be a reading inspired by certain motifs in Lacan's thought, which to some extent is close to Lyotard's view in its ties with the Kantian analytic of the sublime. The

361 Noica, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, pp. 13-16.

362 See: Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans Geoff Bennington and Brian Masumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

unknown, unnamed and unrepresented that hides inside the house would correspond in this interpretation with what Lacan calls “the Thing,” *das Ding*. This thing is absent, alien, or removed. It is not exactly “nothing,” but rather “it is not” (“*non pas n’est rien, mais littéralement n’est pas*”).³⁶³ Elsewhere Lacan characterizes “the Thing” as that which is always hidden, the void presenting itself as *nihil*, nothing.³⁶⁴ The subject and the whole play of representations, or *Vorstellungen*, revolve around this originally absent thing, while the subject’s “striving to uncover” – *Wiederzufinden* – and to endow meanings are directed towards it.³⁶⁵

This absent, hidden “Thing” is represented by “other things”: concrete or particular objects. In Leśmian’s poem, this function seems to be fulfilled by the basic elements of the represented world, especially by the snow, but also by the house, the window, and the wool. These elements conceal the “Thing,” while simultaneously revealing it as concealed, hidden and absent. These elements are all familiar. The subject recognizes them and recognizes himself in them, perhaps even wishing to identify himself with them, since they confirm the vision of the world and his own “I” that he has created. They help mask the yawning void inside the house – that which is alien, other and disturbing. They mask what is essentially external and unassimilable to the order of representation constructed by the subject, even though this alien element in fact lies precisely within, inside, at the very center – in other words, in the place traditionally occupied by essence or true substantial being. Therefore, the developed description of the snow would form a mere substitute for the Thing, a signifying representation masking the impossibility of naming the Thing itself. Thus the theme of the return to childhood and memory – at first glance the central motif of the poem – is only a metaphor for a longing for the lost Thing and for an attempt to rediscover it. The poem’s narrative would ultimately serve as an attempt to fill in the abyss between the thing and its representation – a multiplication of signifiers, representations and objects in place of that which is absent, unnamable, always evading the subject and his desire.

Apart from this order of the thing and the representation, another crucial and strongly emphasized symbolic order appears in “Snow” – the order of the trace. We might even say that the axis of the subject’s narration, indeed of the entire poem, is what happens at the intersection of these three fundamental elements: the thing, or “the real,” in the sense of “*das Ding*”; its representation, *Vorstellung*; and the third element – the trace.

363 Lacan, Jacques, “Das Ding (II),” *L’éthique de la psychanalyse*, p. 79

364 Lacan, Jacques, “De la création ex nihilo,” *L’éthique de la psychanalyse*, pp. 142, 146.

365 Lacan, “Das Ding (II),” pp. 72, 80.

Much like the image of the house, the trace also appears in the poem suddenly and unexpectedly, accompanied by a sense of fear emphasized on two occasions (“despite the torments of fear”; “My heart froze”). Contact with the trace – more so even than the encounter with the “something” inside the house – is traumatic, as if the protagonist were standing face to face with some numinous form (like the encounter with the “real” that Lacan calls “*tyche*”). Contact with the trace is – in a literal sense – tangible: the protagonist touches it, rubs against it, encounters it by putting his hand on the window pane. The pane itself might be understood as a mediating layer between the external world – or the domain of objects and their images – and that which is hidden inside the house, or the “Thing.”³⁶⁶ The sense of touch is vital here, since it indicates that the trace is neither absent nor “something” inside the house, but nor is it a definite object, representation, or image constructed by the subject.

Leśmian’s way of characterizing the trace (“*ślad*”) in his poem diverges significantly from the colloquial meanings associated with the idea in Polish. We do not know who left this trace behind. Is it the handprint of the speaker of the poem himself? The phrase “I felt the generous trace” seems rather to indicate that he is touching a trace already on the window pane, a trace left behind by somebody or something else not named or referred to in the poem at all. Therefore, I would interpret the trace as a way for the absent Thing to manifest itself on the surface of objects and phenomena. This thing never actually *was*, since it was always merely a trace, existing only as an imprint left behind by the (always) absent, or not-present – both in the temporal and spatial senses of the latter term. Thus the line “when I bore the trace in my hand” also seems ambiguous, since it might refer either to survival or loss, to victory or failure. One “bears” something valuable, something that one has managed to save or preserve, something that must be kept safe or passed on. But one also “bears” pain and feelings of lack or absence that must be endured.

I read the generosity of the trace as an effect of the original, radical absence of the Thing, thanks to which it becomes autonomous and – much like the footprint from Nabokov’s *The Gift* – ambiguous. Freed from presence and reference, the being of the trace is really an “excess” of being – a miniscule being that is simultaneously something excessive, unnecessary or even extravagant, constituting a surplus – in this case – of sense. Therefore, the trace may “give” a multiplicity of tropes, meanings, representations, interpretations, since it does not allow itself to be reduced to any permanent regime of

366 Ireneuz Opacki reads the window pane in “Snow” as a figure for reflection and thus for identity – as the “place” in which one may rediscover one’s “dead state, preserved in the window pane” (“Pośmiertna w głębi jezior maska,” *Studia o Leśmianie*, p. 328).

representation or to be placed in any petrified semantic order. Meanings and representations can come into existence only because there is nothing “inside” but the eternal trace. The trace is contagious: the hand on which it remains – and which may be read as a figure for poetic creation – changes everything into fairy tale or story,³⁶⁷ multiplying the senses and traces, bringing to life an order of the imaginary. Therefore, it also makes literature itself possible as a “tracing” of reality.

The trace contains a double paradox. First of all, it is not the Thing, but rather that which is always left behind by the absent Thing. Secondly, it is not a representation, but that which makes all representation possible and which is prior to any order of representation. The trace is something that mediates between being and non-being, the thing and its representation, pure identity and pure difference, the subjective and what is alien to the subject. The trace both makes possible and undermines the permanent constitution of the subject. It makes it possible, since the traumatic trace preserved from the past gives rise to the subject as a being conscious of itself, and sets into motion the mechanism of memory and desire, constantly renewing the subject’s attempts to restore the past, its striving to regain meanings and to enact the same. At the same time, it undermines the subject, since the trace is also that which is lost, which makes a return to the self impossible, and which introduces the element of irreducible difference. Therefore, Leśmian’s “recollection” is clearly closer to the Freudian scene of memory (in Derrida’s interpretation) than to Platonic anamnesis. After all, Derrida’s interpretation of Freud suggests that the trace erases both the “I” and presence, thus appearing in a double game of repetition and erasure, while life itself “must be thought of as Trace before Being may be determined as presence.”³⁶⁸ For Plato, on the other hand, all the aspects and functions of the trace – as imprint (*typos*), remnant (*ichnos*), sign (*semeion*) – serve the constitution of the image, or *eikon*, and the return of the same, or *parousia* of an original presence.

“Snow” is an unmimetic poem about mimesis. Memory appears here as a figure of mimesis in a form we might describe as the “mimesis of the trace” – or as “tracing.” From this point of view, Leśmian’s poem would represent a staging of this process, implying that reality is given not as full presence, essence, or full being in the sense of the Platonic *ontos on*, nor as appearance, phantasm or

³⁶⁷ On the subject of the semantics of the “fairy tale” (*baśń*), especially in its epistemological functions, see: Czabanowska-Wróbel, Anna, *Baśń w literaturze Młodej Polski* (Kraków: Universitas, 1996); Kijak, Aleksandra, “Baśń o świętej niemiłości-Bolesława Leśmiana ‘Pieśni przecudnej Wasylysy,’” *Ruch Literacki* 1 (2005), p. 61.

³⁶⁸ Derrida, Jacques, “Freud and the Scene of Writing, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 255.

image, but rather as trace. Reality is given as an imprint, or *typos*, whose order cannot be reduced either to metaphysical presence or to metaphysical absence. Mimetic “tracing,” on the other hand, is a response to this trace-like mode of being’s self-manifestation. Its order can be reduced neither to re-presentation, in the sense of a doubling of some originally given presence, nor to representation in the sense of a reduction of being to the object as subjective projection, nor to imitation in the sense of the creation of exact, “identical” images or copies of reality. Instead, it is the tracking of the world as trace and the leaving of one’s own trace behind on it.

The trace as imprint is a theme well known in ancient tradition, where it frequently appears especially in the context of the reflections of memory, but also in Christian tradition, where it may be found in the motif of the *Veronica*, or true image – the “imprint” left behind by transcendent being, which is radically different from a normal image made by human hands. In modernity the trace-imprint appears in the context of the problem of “the real” and the forms of its presence. In this way, the previously unquestioned relation of the trace with that to which it refers – and with the order of representation – is problematized, questioned and loosened in various ways. Leśmian’s “Snow” opens the question of the trace in Polish modern literature, while also giving it – assuming the interpretation presented here is defensible – its most radical interpretation, treating the trace as an imprint of something that was never present, as a peculiar, unrepresentational form of the real understood as that which is absent, alien, Nothing.

In the writings of another poet of the trace – Tadeusz Różewicz – that which imprints itself in the subject or in language will be something more concrete: the world in “Conversation with the Prince” (“Rozmowa z księciem”) and “Exit” (“Wyjście”), or a person who has departed, but whose departure confirms that he was once present – as in an untitled poem from *Regio*.³⁶⁹ The question of the trace is problematized in yet another way in Stasiuk’s *Dukla*. Here the unambiguous formula of the trace as the “condensed presence”³⁷⁰ of a person who once imprinted his trace into the sand seems – through its ostentatious referentiality – to strengthen or restore the direct connection between the trace, representation and presence. On the other hand, the trace – in spite of its “fragile form” – turns out to be more real than the original presence, or at least more ontologically “vivid.” By contrast, in Olga Tokarczuk’s *Final Stories (Ostatnie*

369 For more on this subject, see: Nycz, Ryszard, *Tekstowy świat* (Warszawa: IBL, 1993), pp. 103-110; and *Ślady obecności: Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości* (Kraków: Universitas, 2004).

370 Stasiuk, Andrzej, *Dukla* (Wołowiec: Czarne, 1997), p. 29.

historie), the act of leaving or not leaving a trace forms a metaphor for the existential condition of the main characters – their rootedness or lack of rootedness in the world.

Is an aesthetics of the trace, or of mimetic tracing, possible? If so, how? As a provisional hypothesis, we might propose that the trace as *typos*, imprint, or strange “invasion” of the real would be closest to Walter Benjamin’s aesthetics of shock.³⁷¹ For it explodes the domain of the aesthetic as “beautiful appearance,” traditional representation, image, or mediation, replacing it with “intoxication” and direct, “localized” action. On the other hand, the trace as remnant – which I can only briefly refer to here – would bear its closest affinity with an aesthetics of ruin, the fragment, allegory and nostalgia.

371 See Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999). Vattimo (*Al di là del soggetto*, pp. 67-68) links the “Benjaminian shock of art” with the Heideggerian category of technology as *Ge-stell*, which interrupts the metaphysical relation of subject and object, thus causing the human being to find himself in a situation of “disturbance.”

Gombrowicz and Weak Thought

I laugh at the metaphysics...
...that devours me.³⁷²

At first glance it might appear that any form or variety of weak thought would be entirely foreign to Gombrowicz – in other words, any kind of thought that programmatically exhibits the uncertainty, relativity, locality, contextuality and situationality of its own foundations, criteria, assumptions, and even makes of these characteristics its primary virtue and value. Gombrowicz's decisive and categorical manner of expression, his formulation of clear judgments and views, the sharpness of his polemical tone, along with various other characteristics, would appear to indicate that he represents – as speaker or subject in his own literature and philosophy – a strong subject constituting a clearly delineated textual “I.” Gombrowicz's subject builds a strong and distinctive individual perspective from which to view and evaluate reality – as well as its universe of values and meanings. He also builds his own strong language and style in which to speak about that reality – or rather, through which he can impose his own peculiar and strong vision of the world and himself.

Nevertheless, I believe that an attempt to read Gombrowicz – or certain threads and aspects of his work – in the light of the assumptions of weak thought is not necessarily an undertaking doomed to failure in advance. I am well aware of possible accusations that placing Gombrowicz's thought in yet another philosophical and cultural context – and an anachronistic context to which Gombrowicz himself never referred – would be a futile exercise of doubtful scholarly value. Such a move might lead at best to the predetermined conclusion that Gombrowicz was, as always, the first – in this case, the first representative of weak thought. Nonetheless, I shall try to prove that the possible links or similarities between the Polish writer's style of thinking and weak thought are worthy of attention and analysis because they are based not so much on an affinity between specific ideas, views or philosophical assumptions, but rather on a certain characteristic attitude towards ideas, views, conceptions and values in general – as well as towards being, subjectivity, the past, cultural heritage, etc. In my view, Gombrowicz's thought (or certain aspects of it) and weak thought (or certain of its elements) are worth comparing, or at least setting face to face, even if only for the same reason that one might set two mirrors face to

372 Gombrowicz, Witold, *Dziennik*, Volume II (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986), p. 191.

face – in order that each might reflect the other’s image. Even if these images will sometimes be distorted and deformed, or even entirely inconsistent, it might turn out that something greater will appear in these mirrors, if only momentarily: an image of the very condition of contemporary thought.

Is it possible to find the traces of weak thought – understood as I have attempted to reconstruct it here – in Gombrowicz’s writings? In fact, the metaphors of weakness, weakening, frailty and other diverse variants of it appears quite often in Gombrowicz’s work, especially in his later writings. Gombrowicz uses these various metaphors in different contexts to express different types of subjective experience. However, we may distinguish three basic contexts, which I shall provisionally define as the existential, ontological and cultural.

The experience of one’s own existence as enfeebled, frail or weakened appears in the *Diary*, in the concluding sections of the Berlin reminiscences. On a literal level, Gombrowicz is giving an account of an illness he has recovered from and his stay in hospital. Yet the weakness frequently evoked here does not refer merely to his somatic state, though undoubtedly the experience of corporeal weakness or fragility is vitally significant. Gombrowicz also describes the broad experience of individual existence more generally as “an existence no longer sufficiently existing and a reality no longer sufficiently real.” Therefore, existence and reality are marked by lack and an incomplete, uncertain ontological status. This weakness also signifies the lack of a strong, clear rooting in time and space – a feeling of not being settled – which is brought about by the author’s suspension between Argentina and Europe. Argentina has become increasingly foreign to him, associated with the past and therefore beginning to dissolve or lose its reality. Europe, on the other hand, which is supposedly familiar, has also become foreign and unreal, since he experiences it as a mirage: “not allowing me, weakened as I am, to possess it.” In this variegated experience of weakness, the text of the diary itself fulfills a special role, since it is something more than just a traditional record, account or expression of the experience. In fact, the diary is a kind of extension of weak existence, its “skin,” the place where it comes into contact with an external reality that has also lost its “strong,” clearly defined character: “So this diary is merely the encounter of my enfeebled, frail existence with the existence of Europe; and perhaps my feebleness and exhaustion have contaminated it... Oh dear.”

The vision of weak ontology may be found above all in *Cosmos*, a novel representing a universe of signs and messages in need of deciphering: “This place seems to be swarming with signs...”; “For every sign deciphered by chance, how many signs must go unnoticed, sewn into the natural order of

things....”³⁷³ However, these signs never arrange themselves into any permanent, fully present, stable or complete order. Each constructed arrangement or “configuration” is a momentary event, a local concentration, or a transient crystallization vulnerable to disintegration. Some kind of order always arises, but it is imperfect and weak. Some element within it always hangs towards the peripheries, towards unrest, thus opposing the constructive operations of the subject. An example here is given by a single sparrow, incommensurable with its own meaning, not associable with anything, and yet still “hanging motionlessly on the margin.”³⁷⁴ It is precisely the disintegration of the “strong,” essentialist version of reality – as a transcendent source of meaning constituting the reference point for all signs – which causes these signs to turn into traces with no reference to any prior presence.

Barely a year after *Cosmos*, Gombrowicz’s wrote a commentary on *The Divine Comedy* – an attempt to rewrite it in a more perfect form better suited to the experience of modern man. This commentary turns into a meditation on the past and cultural tradition, as well as on their very mode of existence and the possibility of coming to know them.

“But in the end the past is something that does not exist. And a past from six centuries ago is now so distant that I can have had no contact with it even in my own past. Ever since I have been alive it has been something “bygone.” So what does it mean: ‘he lived in the past’? In my present I find traces – the poem – and from them I extract this singular existence. I must recreate it for myself. Therefore, communing with the past means constantly creating it, calling it into being... But since we are reading it from the traces it has left behind – and these traces depend on accident, on the material, more or less fragile, in which they have been transmitted, on various incidents of time – then this past is chaotic, random and fragmentary... The past is a waxworks made up of scraps... which are truly what it is.”³⁷⁵

Here Gombrowicz links two temporal dimensions: the grand, universal time of culture and tradition, and the small, individual time of his own family history and thus of individual biography. He mentions both Dante and his own great-grandmother, about whom he knows only that she went shopping on June 16, 1699. In both cases, the past is given to the subject in a particular – therefore imperfect and incomplete – way; that is, as a trace, echo, or relict. This trace might be the great work of a human soul, or an everyday, banal object, like the barragon and ginger purchased by the writer’s great-grandmother on the day of

373 Gombrowicz, Witold, *Kosmos* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1988), pp. 44, 33.

374 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

375 Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, Volume 3, p. 230.

Michał Korybut Wiśniowiecki's election as king. Either way, the trace both uncovers and reveals the past, making it accessible to knowledge, while simultaneously covering and obscuring it, undermining its direct, certain and full presence: "it was an unheard-of word, something like 'is,' but weaker."

The past exists by the power of its own persistence, while also undergoing a process of construction or even reconstruction. For the past is born – as Gombrowicz claims – at the meeting point of two beams or rays. One of them originates from without and has an objective character: the voice, message, and trace of tradition, the past that reaches the present. The second beam is the production of the person who must recreate and interpret this partially given past.

After all, as Gombrowicz emphasizes, the trace itself as a medium is afflicted with imperfection, fragility and weakness. Nevertheless, its material impermanence and randomness does not appear to be treated as a negative element that interferes with communication. On the contrary, though random in themselves, these qualities constitute the essential semantic quality of the message, since the message imprints in itself the trace of time, and bears witness to time's destructive action. In this way, it has meaning. Therefore, we might say that writing as the leaving of a trace, or as "tracing," is a project based both on opposing the destructive force of time and on exposing itself to time's power. Elsewhere Gombrowicz reflects on the utopian idea of a total diary, which would constitute a record of every day, or even every hour. Thus the diary would allow for the complete recreation of one's own history, like a restoration of one's own life: "Life escapes through the dates like water through the fingers. But at least something would remain... a kind of trace..."³⁷⁶

Gombrowicz's gesture towards tradition is not the strong gesture of a classicist unambiguously inscribing himself into a tradition treated as an unchanging, permanent and always fully present source of values. Nor is it the opposing, though equally strong gesture of an avant-gardist, unambiguously negating and rejecting tradition. Gombrowicz takes the middle, or weak road. He neither imitates nor copies the Dantean tradition from centuries earlier, nor replaces it with his own project. Instead he "traces" it – in other words, he responds with his own trace to the trace left behind by the past, or by tradition. He takes up the trace while submitting it to deformation, thus transcribing or rewriting it (in the case of *The Divine Comedy*, this is a literal rewriting).

Gombrowicz assumes a somewhat similar attitude towards various philosophical concepts and discourses, including existentialism, Marxism and structuralism, as well as towards traditional philosophical ideas such as being,

376 Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, Volume 2, p. 33.

freedom, existence, reality, consciousness, morality and many others. He submits them to two operations, which I shall define in terms drawn from Vattimo: monumentalization and ornamentalization.³⁷⁷ The first of these signifies the gesture of turning to classical ideas or philosophical languages, assimilating them and simultaneously treating them as peculiar monuments – an important part of cultural heritage, without which there is no way to do philosophy or to think about oneself, the world or values. The second term signifies a gesture to weaken these ideas or concepts, not so much through a critique from outside, from some new or better position, but rather through the dance-like strategy of a deformation, “loosening,” and undermining of their foundations. It means forcing classical ideas into an extreme form in which they turn into their opposites. It means drawing out their assumptions and turning these against them, extracting what is marginal or peripheral within them, emphasizing that which contradicts the very theses they ostensibly expound.

Here Gombrowicz does not reflect on the meanings of tradition or the past. Nor does he consider the erasing of traces, or the disappearance and dispersal inscribed into their ontology. Instead, he develops a conscious and considered strategy of “weakening” cultural forms that have become too stiff and burdensome for the subject. This form of weakening, alongside those discussed earlier, may be described – in analogy to Nietzschean active nihilism – as an “active” weakness, or as a certain attitude or way of interpreting culture.

Gombrowicz’s philosophical lexicon can be treated broadly as a lexicon of weak or weakened ideas. In my view, this is clearly demonstrated by the many characteristically Gombrowiczean expressions that may be interpreted in the context of weak thought. It would be difficult here to touch on many of these even in the briefest terms: weak nature, loose morality,³⁷⁸ the subject who “can be” rather than “is”³⁷⁹ (referring to himself), the elusiveness of the human, which always falls outside itself,³⁸⁰ “ordinary” freedom, as opposed to “exacting” liberty, the avoidance of responsibility, finality, strained consciousness, absolute authenticity, and so on – just to mention a few typical examples. Therefore, Gombrowicz’s stubbornly repeated declarations that he was the first existentialist or structuralist should – in my view – be read in a double sense, that is, as declarations of simultaneous belonging and rejection. Gombrowicz claims them as his own, while maintaining that they are foreign to

377 Here I am referring to the essay “Ornamento monumento” from *La fine della modernità* (*Koniec nowoczesności* in the Polish translation), though I apply the ideas of the “monument” and the “ornament” in a somewhat different context than Vattimo.

378 Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, Volume 1, p. 300.

379 *Ibid.*, p. 304.

380 Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, Volume 3, p. 283.

him. After all, surely precursors have the right to distance themselves from their own ideas?

It is probably coincidental that the titular phrase from one of Vattimo's most recent books³⁸¹ – devoted to the condition of religion in the contemporary, postmodern world – appears in identical form at the very beginning of Gombrowicz's *Diary*, where he comments on a certain letter from a Polish Catholic woman.³⁸² The "faith in faith" – for this is the expression I have in mind – about which both Gombrowicz and Vattimo write is a weak faith, a faith that has lost its naturalness, its self-evidence, and the conviction in the inviolability of its own strong foundations. However, the two thinkers resemble each other only in their diagnosis of the modern – weak – condition of faith and religion. Their paths soon part, as Gombrowicz is only interested in the sociological perspective, or the mechanisms for the collective creation of various faiths, while Vattimo attempts to construct a new philosophy of religion built on ideas of incarnation as the weakening of the sacred, interpretation and historicity.

It is surely also coincidental that the famous Gombrowiczian phrase "the wiser you are, the more foolish" sounds almost identical to the Romanian proverb with which Noica begins his essay "Cum gândește poporul român" from the volume *Pagini despre sufletul românesc*: "where reason is plentiful, there's plenty of folly" (*unde e multa minte, e si prostie multa*). Nevertheless, in this case the similarities run deeper. The Romanian "fragility of being" and "Polish lukewarmness"³⁸³ appear to have a great deal in common. Both propositions are aimed above all at the totalizing, expansive rationalism of modern culture. Both have a somewhat conservative character. Both may be defined as the positions of provincials fully aware that they come from minor cultures, though never treating their provinciality as a burdensome limitation that must be jettisoned as soon as possible on the path of cultural imitation. On the contrary, they consider their afflictions as a chance to construct a conscious strategy to view modern culture from a distance – from the position of the outsider. This position is not based on total negation and rejection, but rather on distrust toward, and suspicion of, both the models of identity and the grand narratives created by modern culture. It allows both thinkers to seek out of the weak points of this culture and to disintegrate the "central" by means of the "marginal" and "peripheral," to undermine the "universal" by means of the "local." However, this does not mean a simple return to the premodern, or a utopian attempt at

381 See: Vattimo, *Credere di credere* (Milano: Garzanti, 1996).

382 Gombrowicz, *Dziennik*, Volume 1, p. 45.

383 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

restitution of some original vision of the world and of the human being uncontaminated by the afflictions of modernity (though Noica is not entirely free of this temptation). Instead, it means an attempt to turn that which modernity has rejected or left behind – after reinterpretation and adaptation – into a tool of criticism, an agent serving to reverse and shift the oppositions between center and periphery, great or universal culture and minor culture, to turn it into the material for the construction of their own identity.

“I laugh at the metaphysics that devours me” – this brief citation from the *Diary* accurately and pithily characterizes Gombrowicz’s relation not only to metaphysics, but – in my view – to tradition more generally. After all, to be devoured means precisely to inhere in something entirely, to be inside, to be a part of something. But to be able to simultaneously laugh means that one must in some way be outside, or at least be able to maintain a certain distance. Somebody who has been entirely devoured in the strong sense – without leaving a trace – might struggle to muster a sense of humor.

The image that emerges from the mirrors I have set face to face – the mirror of weak thought and the mirror of Gombrowicz’s thought – may not be entirely consistent and convincing. Nevertheless, I think – though I treat this thinking as “weak” – that Gombrowicz’s artistic and philosophical intuitions give strong expression to the condition of European philosophy, the experience of being, culture, etc. as described by Vattimo. Conversely, referring to weak thought might even allow us to take a different perspective on those aspects of Gombrowicz’s thought and writing that critics have described as contradictions, antinomies and ambiguities. Gombrowicz as a weak thinker means a Gombrowicz who is necessarily both metaphysician and antimetaphysician, modernist and postmodernist, philosopher and artist, inheritor and mocker of tradition.

Weakness and the Trace in the Poetry of Tadeusz Różewicz

Różewicz's poetry is linked with weak thought through rich and broad associations that can be examined on multiple planes: ontological, existential, epistemological, and aesthetic. If it were ever permissible to look at a writerly world as the "realization" or "illustration" of particularly philosophical ideas, then we certainly might say that Różewicz's work had been created to be interpreted in the spirit of the basic assumptions of weak ontology. For instance, the two ideas contained in the title of this section, weakness and the trace, which have a fundamental meaning in the philosophical lexicons of Noica and Vattimo in particular, also fulfill a highly significant role in Różewicz's poetic lexicon. However, these similarities of thought do not mean that Różewicz's writing derives from philosophical ideas, or that it has submitted to singular influences. In fact, the convergences can be explained partly genealogically (by the influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger on both the representatives of weak thought and the Polish poet),³⁸⁴ but above all historically and contextually. Różewicz's poetry, much like weak thought, seems to be a response – a particularly complete response – to the fundamental "events" of modernity. They both represent attempts to read and understand these events: to give them ideational form in the case of Noica and Vattimo (and various other thinkers), and to create a unique poetic language in which to express them in the case of Różewicz. After all, Różewicz became more aware than any other writer (perhaps alongside the later Gombrowicz) of the consequences flowing from the crisis of metaphysics for the language of literature, or, more broadly, for artistic form. He gave poetic expression to these consequences.

Four basic clusters of problems mark out, in my view, the areas of the most significant similarities and convergences between weak thought and Różewicz's poetic worldview: 1) a belief in the disappearance of transcendence (the Absolute, Being, the metaphysical foundation of things), the exhaustion of the sources of sense and the "dissolution" of the "strong" version of being in the world of media transmissions; 2) a subsequent belief that we face a crisis in language's referential power in general, in its ability to reach and name the world, and particularly in the poetics of symbolism characteristic of early modernism and its conception of poetic imagery – which assumed the ability of the poetic word to reconcile and integrate content and form, signifier and

384 Aleksandra Ubertowska discusses Heidegger's influence on Różewicz in the context of Różewicz's reception of the poetry of Celan and Hölderlin. Cf. Ubertowska, Aleksandra, *Tadeusz Różewicz a literatura niemiecka* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), pp. 52-59 and 62-66.

signified, transcendent and empirical, subjective experience and its literary expression; 3) a conception of weak form as the aesthetic or poetological expression of the wide-ranging (ontological, epistemological, existential) experience of the weakening of being and the forms of its manifestation; 4) a conception of a weak subject, who does not represent the world, but “traces” it – which in Różewicz’s work means to leave a trace on the world, to expose oneself to the world’s traces, to be the place where the world imprints itself. All of these characteristics might legitimately be connected to the idea of philosophical nihilism. Indeed, this is precisely what some Różewicz scholars, including Andrzej Skrendo and Michał Januszkiewicz, have done. However, it is interesting that Różewicz’s poetry also seems to point to meanings of “weakness” that do not fit entirely within the concept of nihilism. In this way, it contradicts the declarations of the very promoter of weak thought, Gianni Vattimo, according to whom weak ontology is identical to nihilism, or at least originates in it.

“The Poet Weakens, Images Lose Their Strength”: Różewicz’s Weak form

First of all, we should outline – following in the footsteps of the experts on Różewicz’s work – the most frequently delineated basic characteristics of his poetics, which may be legitimately linked (though, for the moment, only in a very general way) to the expression “weak form” in the broadest understanding of this term. Most importantly, critics have frequently associated these characteristics with a postmodern poetics of the literary work, including the following aspects:³⁸⁵ the fragment understood autonomously as remnant, ruin or

385 I refer here to the following studies: Skrendo, Andrzej, *Tadeusz Różewicz i granice literatury. Poetyka i etyka transgresji* (Kraków: Universitas, 2002); Nycz, Ryszard, “O kolażu tekstowym. Zarys dziejów pojęcia,” *Tekstowy świat. Poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze* (Warszawa: Universitas, 1993); Filipowicz, Halina, *Laboratorium form nieczystych: dramaturgia T. Różewicza*, trans. T. Kunz (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001); Burek, Tomasz, “Nieczyste formy Różewicza,” *Twórczość* 7 (1974). In Skrendo’s book, two themes are crucial to my reflections: positive negation and negative affirmation, which – according to Skrendo – are Różewicz’s fundamental poetic gestures, close to both *Verwindung* and the theme of the trace. Citations from Różewicz’s works come from the following editions: Różewicz, Tadeusz, *Poezje*, Volumes 1 and 2 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1988) – hereinafter referred to in the text as “P” followed by the page number in parentheses after citations (“I” and “II” refer to volumes 1 and 2); Różewicz, Tadeusz, *Plaskorzeźba* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie,

scrap, and not organically as a part of a greater, though only potentially existing whole (see Andrzej Skrendo and Tomasz Kunz); polysemy; strong intertextuality and a collage-like quality emphasizing the destruction of the integrality of the work (Ryszard Nycz); the negative conception of poetic form (Kunz); the “impurity” of form (Tomasz Burek, Halina Filipowicz). Weak form is form in which the classical unity of the internal (content, “spirit”) and external (material, medium) has disintegrated. The unity characteristic of “forms once so well arranged” (“Formy” PI 412) is replaced by “wild, misshapen forms” (“Niejasny wiersz” PII 420), which are thus heterogeneous, incoherent and fragmentary. This is also a form in which no category of perfection applies. It has been replaced by a collection of remnants and scraps, a form making use of “low,” shoddy material discarded both by “big” history and by traditional aesthetics: “metaphors / paper entrails / images gathered / on the trash heap of history / on the trash heaps of poetry” (“Nagle” PII 465); “close to my heart / is the big city trash heap / the poet of trash heaps is / closer to the truth / than the poet of the clouds” (“Rocznica” PII 443). Therefore, Różewicz’s poetics questions the ideal of the *opus perfectum*, both in the descriptive sense (as in the closed or completed work) and in the evaluative sense.

We might also apply the concept of monumentality – in the sense Vattimo attaches to it³⁸⁶ – to Różewicz’s conception of poetic language and, more broadly, of artistic form. The semantic field of this concept creates a range of repeating textual motifs in Różewicz’s work. These motifs might be treated as metaphors more or less directly referring to Różewicz’s understanding of text, language and form, while also constituting an expression of the poet’s artistic self-awareness.

Among these motifs we may distinguish several different groups. The first of these – we might call it the group of “material metaphors” – refers to the characteristics of poetic material, especially the fragility and impermanence of this material, on which the trace, sign, letter or writing is left. This material is sometimes sand, plaster, and salt (“Na powierzchni poematu i w środku”), sometimes just sand, or “sands of words,” in which a mysterious trace remains (“rzeczywistość, którą oglądałem” PII 298). Jesus too writes in the sand letters that are soon obscured and erased (“Nieznany list” PI 510). On the other hand, the motif of the stone speaks of the exhaustion of language. Here Różewicz performs an interesting operation to reverse and remodel the connotations of

1991) – hereinafter referred to in the text as “PI” followed by the page number in parentheses after citations.

386 Hanna Marciniak took this road in her article “O epitafiach Tadeusza Różewicza” (*Teksty Drugie* 3 [2007]), where she analyzes the motif of the memorial in Różewicz’s work in reference to the question of forgetting and death.

stoniness as permanence and the ability to overcome the destructive power of time. Here a petrified language is rather a speech that has lost its power to express and convey living reality, its ability to renew the subject's contact with reality and to name the world: "Paper into stone / pages into stone tablets / quill into chisel / pen into burin / they transform in the hands / of a dead poet" (PII 457).

A similar reversal and remodeling is also apparent in the group of organic metaphors. Nature in Różewicz's writing tends to mean an animality and biological existence that emphasizes the mortality, impermanence and transience of both existence and poetry, rather than the eternally renewable, inexhaustible sources of inspiration and vital power. Inner speech – "blind, deaf mute, denied its wings" – is compared with a stump (Różewicz uses this metaphor twice: in the poem "Dwa języki" [PII 390] and in an untitled poem opening with "wszystkie obrazy..." [PII 455]). The poet in the act of writing is somebody who has "emerged from the animal world" (PII 420), an "animal immersed in the world" ("Jestem nikt" PII 412), a "nervous animal" (PII 457). Therefore, we might place Różewicz's organic metaphors in the context of such ideas as "earth" (Heidegger), "becoming into becoming" (Noica), and *sfondamento* (Vattimo): "perhaps there's no need / to build to the sky? / perhaps it's better / by the earth / to the earth" (Pł 35).

The wound, flaw or rupture make up a group of textual motifs that are difficult to interpret, though particularly crucial for my argument. Zbigniew Majchrowski interprets the wound as a trauma or flaw, an existential mark originating in the fact of the poet's birth.³⁸⁷ Ryszard Nycz associates these motifs with the problem of the boundary between the external and the internal.³⁸⁸ In my interpretation, I shall be referring to the Heideggerian context, specifically to the idea of the "rift" (*Riss*) from "The Origin of the Work of Art." Of course, Heidegger describes the "rift" as the distinction between world and earth, but simultaneously as their bond (*Fuge*) and the place of their mutual belonging: "This rift does not let the opponents break apart; it brings what opposes measure and boundary into its common outline [*Umriß*]."³⁸⁹ This would seem to mean simply that the "rift" preserves the difference between world and earth, between setting up and setting forth (in opposition to dialectical reduction), while at the same time – not in spite of the difference, but rather

387 Majchrowski, Zbigniew, *Poezja jak otwarta rana: Czytając Różewicza* (Warszawa: PIW, 1993), pp. 193-194.

388 Nycz, Ryszard, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), p. 187.

389 Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," p. 188.

thanks to it – the worldly and earthly may belong to each other and co-exist. Can we find a similar understanding of the “rift” in Różewicz’s work?

Apparently not, since Różewicz tends to emphasize the “negative” aspects of the rupture and rift – in other words, those aspects denoting dispersal, splitting, or the incommensurability of that which is marked by the rift or rupture. On the other hand, it is precisely this rupture which forms the source of language and poetry. He takes up this theme on several occasions, each time placing the emphasis at slightly different points. In the poem “On Certain Properties of So-Called Poetry” (“O pewnych właściwościach tak zwanej poezji” PII 98), he writes that whereas there can be no poetry in the “hot person,” nor in the “cold person,” it may live and develop in the “lukewarm person,” oozing “out of the rupture, the flaw.” The rupture – combined here with the loaded word “flaw” – has a clear ethical dimension, since “lukewarmness” – which is further strengthened by the New Testament association (“So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” – Revelation 3:16) – may mean indifference, lack of engagement, conformism. Therefore, the source of poetic creation would be a kind of ethical weakness, and being a poet would be associated with a sense of guilt, with entanglement in a morally ambiguous situation. On the other hand, the phrase “it oozes” suggests associations with blood dripping out of a wound and rather implies the existential meanings of the flaw and rupture, as the depletion of substance, a slow dying.

In “Theater of Shadows” (“Teatr cieni” PII 185), the rupture takes a different form. Here the rupture is difference itself, the gap between the subject and the world, the subject and language, while it also functions in language itself to emphasize the meaning of the sphere “between the words”: “From the rupture / between myself and world / between myself and object / from the distance / between noun and adjective / poetry tries to get out.” This “getting out” might be interpreted in various ways. For instance, we might interpret it as a striving to “get out” of an adverse situation, a deadlock, a trap into which it has fallen, an attempt to find solid ground. Alternatively, we might suppose that the rupture is precisely the place where poetry arises and originates. A constant movement takes place between the subject and language – and therefore, through the medium of language, between the subject and the world as well. This movement has two opposing vectors: coming closer and moving further away, identification and differentiation. The first vector is described by such words as approach, compare, connect, catch (as the subject and word “catch” on each other). The second is described by the rupture, the tear and distancing.

The rupture is not just the parting, the difference between two elements, but also the rift in reality itself: “reality / is filled with reality / through the ruptures

in reality / comes imagination” (“Et in Arcadia Ego” PII 78). This quotation seems to contain a contradiction: reality filled with reality is a fully self-identical reality, while a ruptured reality is quite the opposite. I would propose the following interpretation: reality is closed within itself, fully self-identical. This is the empirical reality, the reality of everyday experience – the only reality to which human beings have access. There is no transcendent world in relation to it, and no way of accessing this world – of crossing to the “other side.” So what are the ruptures in reality? They almost certainly do not represent a path leading beyond empirical reality towards some ideal or “real” world. Instead, they are the “weak,” fragile, damaged places – the rifts in the apparently coherent and homogeneous surface of reality. According to Różewicz, the penetration of these “split” areas is both a chance for poetry and the task of thinking in general. This task is decidedly different both from the negation of the sensual world in the name of some version of idealism, and from complete affirmation of that world.

To recapitulate, the semantics of the rupture in Różewicz’s work is productively ambiguous. On the one hand, it refers to an ethical and ontological defect; on the other hand, it represents a liberation from the burden of reality, a loosening, an opening up to another dimension. Even if this dimension does not represent transcendence traditionally understood, it does bring a kind of revelation, though what it reveals is that which is “between” rather than “beyond” (“through all the rifts / ruptures / to me came light” – “Wspomnienie snu z roku 1963” PII 259). Therefore, we might assume that the poet’s task does not depend on a striving to fill in or abolish the ruptures, rifts or splits, but rather to maintain and cultivate them, since they represent a kind of negative place, the paradoxical origin out of which poetry itself speaks as the play of earth and world, uncovering and concealing, both founding and undermining meaning.

The word “rupture” – which consistently returns in Różewicz’s poems – is semantically close to defectiveness, imperfection, or weakness, as well as to the trace: the two fundamental themes of this study. I wish to show that they fulfill an essential role in Różewicz’s work. Weakness has an existential nature in Różewicz’s poetry, denoting the condition of the human being in the modern world, but it also refers to the exhaustion of language, the poetic word’s loss of its former ability to name the world, to create a space for communication and to express experience. In “Green Rose” (“Zielona róża”), this weakness is the state of a disintegrating, collapsing civilization in which all that exists are the “remnants of aesthetics / of faith”: “the weaker remain / at bars and tables / the even weaker / lean on the shadows of words / but those words are so transparent / that visible between them is death / nothing” (PII 11). In other contexts, weakness appears to signify the impossibility of going beyond common,

mediated knowledge: “We are weak, living / in a closed circle / of faces / words names” (“Wyjście” PII 211).

Among these various meanings of the weakness metaphor, the crucial role falls to those emphasizing the “weakness” of poetic language or its disappearance. This theme takes on particular significance in Różewicz’s late work, becoming especially apparent in *Bas-Relief*: “What sprouts from the ashes / of Samuel Beckett? / somewhere there in space / is his weakening breath / then the motionless sentence” (“Miłość do popiołów” PII 429). The weakening of the poet’s voice is not a falling silent in expectation of the authentic, original word, but rather a slow though inevitable disappearance, a withering of language, its “falling away” (“words fall by the wayside” Pł 63), a progressive impoverishment and becoming barren (“a barren power overshadows / the realms of language” Pł 63), a degeneration into empty chatter (PII 186), and a closing of language in a chain of signs referring only to one another: “words turned into words / and there is no end / ‘to the possibilities of man’” (Pł 65).³⁹⁰ This last quotation, semantically rich and interesting, seems to point towards two separate, though closely linked questions. First of all, it points to speech’s loss of the ability to signify or refer to the world, to its “coming unstuck” from reality as a result of the fact that the only point of reference for language has become language. Secondly, it points to the strong link between this process and humanism as the human being’s appropriation (or, in this case, “talking”) of the world. When words refer only to words, the world must disappear or withdraw into shadow. A similar process affects the existence of the human being: “we dwindle with every word” (“Vrsacka elegia” PII 340).

This weakness is not merely a state of things that has happened to poetic language, but also a conscious strategy. The poet’s task is not to save experience and its meanings from the destructive action of time through the cultivation of “high” poetic diction or perfect, closed artistic form. On the contrary, the poet’s task is precisely their “weakening” and destruction: “now / I allow the poems / to escape from me / waste away forget / die out / without a single move towards realization” (Pł 15). Temporality as mortality, destruction or loss – in other words, as Vattimo’s *sfondamento* – becomes the essential dimension of the work and of its form understood in a negative way.

Różewicz also places great emphasis – especially in his poems from the 1980s and 1990s – on the close link between the “weakening” of language or art and the “weakening” of being itself. The formulation “The poet weakens,

390 The last line, which is placed within quotation marks, may perhaps be read as a self-quotation from “Non-Stop Show” (PII 215, 216): “the possibilities of modern man / are unlimited”; “the possibilities of modern man are enormous.”

images lose their strength” (“the poet weakens...” PII 471) refers directly – through an allusion to Rimbaud – to the crisis in the poetics of symbolism. However, it also points to the broader, philosophical context in which this poetics originated, founded on a belief in the unity of experience and the possibility of linguistically reaching the essence of reality: “The metaphor still living bloomed within metaphysics.” Różewicz draws radical conclusions from this connection in *Bas-Relief*, where the death of aesthetics and the exhaustion of language’s ability to name reality are treated as the consequence of the fundamental event in modernity, represented by the decline of being as foundation: “*The extinguishment of the Absolute / destroys the sphere of its manifestation / religion philosophy art languish / the natural resources of language dwindle away*” (Pł 51). Różewicz’s diagnosis of the death of art seems closer to Vattimo’s interpretations than to those of Hegel or Adorno, since it treats this death not as the disappearance of the autonomy of the aesthetic domain, or as a protest against mass communication, but rather as death in art and language that is a response to the disintegration of the “strong” version of reality. Moreover – by referring to Jean-Luc Nancy’s opposition between the image and the trace, as well as to Ryszard Nycz’s notion that the modern work of literature should be treated as an “always unuttered trace, present beyond the representation of reality”³⁹¹ – we might formulate the thesis that, in Różewicz’s poetry, it is precisely the trace that becomes the fundamental instrument of poetry after the “loss of strength” that has affected the traditional poetic means of representation.

“The traits destroyed by time / portray our common face”: Traces of the Subject, Subject as Trace

The poetry of Tadeusz Różewicz offers a great many examples of the subject being treated in categories of the trace.³⁹² These examples are perhaps the

391 Nycz, *Literatura jako trop rzeczywistości*, p. 49.

392 Interestingly, the understanding of the subject as trace may also be found – at around the same time – in a writer as different from Różewicz as Włodzimierz Odojewski. Odojewski’s clear and insightful formulas concerning the trace may be read in both the existential and epistemological contexts. Existence is interpreted as a trace imprinted by the human being in things and the world. The trace is capable of surviving the human being himself. This existence is marked by uncertainty. It is a “spectral,” almost hypothetical existence, suspended between the certainty of being and recollection: “Therefore I say: I do not know whether in a week I shall still *be*. These processes are not only in man, but also in his mind, and precisely in the trace, right in the trace that his

clearest in all Polish literature. In Różewicz's work we may observe a close connection between the trace as a form of the subject's existence and the trace as a means of manifestation for the textual "I." The first aspect refers to philosophical and anthropological questions, while the second concerns a range of questions associated with the status of artistic form.³⁹³

The trace is the form that human existence takes in Różewicz's writings. Being in the world does not mean representing it, describing it, rationalizing it, or even understanding or interpreting it, but rather leaving one's trace on it: "walk faster, you must leave the trace of your feet on this world" ("Gipsowa stopa" ["The Plaster Foot"] PI 109). In "On the Surface of the Poem and Within" ("Na powierzchni poematu i w środku"), this trace form of human existence in the world is even more apparent: the mysterious, vague presence of a person is marked by the traces left on things. The frequent repetitions of the

mind imprints in the space surrounding him after the decomposition of the body. And I believe that these processes occur very rapidly" (Odojewski, *Czas odwrócony* [Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1965], p. 8); "Do I still live at all? The fact that *I am* is something else entirely, since *I live* and *I am* are by no means the same thing. For sometimes one *is* as a trace, as a form imprinted into the air, as a recollection of something that once was, preserved in the memory of others along with the events they have witnessed, present so long as their memory lives" (p. 121). The individual past of the narrator-protagonist, as well as the historical past and the attempt to recreate them, are treated as searching for traces, tracking down that which has remained from the past, which cannot be known with certainty and does not allow its truth to be reached, but is rather an endless process of searching, wandering from one to another ("I walked as if in my own bygone traces," p. 73). A conversation intended to reassure the narrator about the events of his past "was a kind of blind groping about for a trace that turned out to be so faded that it would have been invisible even in the brightest light" (p. 96).

³⁹³The question of the trace has appeared in the scholarship on Różewicz for some time – in various contexts and in various formulations. It is worth mentioning four studies here: the above-mentioned *Poezja jak otwarta rana (Czytając Różewicza)* by Zbigniew Majchrowski, in which the trace theme of the existential wound that constitutes the origin of poetic creation appears; the work of Ryszard Nycz, who interprets the trace in the context of the problem of textual referentiality and the mediation of experience; as well as two articles published in *Teksty Drugie* 3 (2007) – Michał Januszkiewicz's "Różewicz-nihilista," in which the idea of the trace is applied in the context of Heideggerian *Abgrund* and ontological nihilism, and Hanna Marciniak's "O epitafiach Tadeusza Różewicza," making use of the idea of the trace to examine the problems of memory, forgetting and artistic form in Różewicz's writing. Nihilism – in the sense shaped by Nietzsche, Heidegger and later Vattimo (that is, in the sense resembling weak ontology) – is the fundamental interpretive category used by Andrzej Skrendo to interpret Różewicz's poetry. Cf. Skrendo, Andrzej, *Tadeusz Różewicz i granice literatury: Poetyka i etyka transgresji* (Kraków: Universitas, 2002); *Liryka nowoczesna. Interpretacje* (Kraków: Universitas, 2007).

word “trace” appear in two grammatical variants: a trace of something (fingers, lipstick) and a trace left behind by something (by fingers, by lips, by a mouth). The first trace suggests the presence of a person who departed not long before and thus is somehow half present. The trace confirms this presence, affirms it, perhaps even implies hope for its reappearance or return. This is the trace understood as “imprint” (as in the Greek *typos*), guaranteeing that the absent thing once really existed. The second trace, on the other hand, is a trace-remnant (the Greek *ichnos*), implying a more radical form of absence and disintegration, the impossibility of a second coming of the person who has departed, the impossibility of unifying into one complete picture of a person all the ephemeral, scattered traces and relicts left behind after that person’s presence. In Różewicz’s writing, the imprint and the remnant – the two basic dimensions of the trace – are closely related. In a certain way, every imprint contains within itself something of the remnant. Nevertheless, in both cases the important point is that the traces are left in ephemeral, impermanent, easily destroyed material (plaster, salt, ashes), thus alluding to death and transience.

The metaphor of the footprint (the trace of a foot), which appears frequently in Różewicz’s work, allows for the construction of entirely opposite meanings. We might define these meanings as the *topoi* of return and departure. In an untitled poem (with the first line “Roses in cellophane” PII 452), the trace allows the subject to find the way back to his point of departure, to return to the beginning, to restore himself, to reconcile the past and the future, and thus somehow to unify himself. The trace left behind is the same trace – or tracks – that the speaker of the poem now finds before him. This situation might be considered normal, commonsensical, and coherent with everyday experience: “I walk along the path / following my own traces [...] I return / before me the traces of my own feet.”

However, things are rather different in an untitled poem from *Bas-Relief* (with the first line “Einst hab ich die Muse gefragt”), where the trace is clearly connected with the question of departure and abandonment. The poem concludes with an interesting, though surprising phrase: “I left before me the traces of my feet / and departed into a lightless land.”³⁹⁴ This sentence – which is highly paradoxical – joins, in slightly altered form, two stereotypical linguistic phrases associated with the word trace (at least in Polish): to leave a trace behind oneself and to return in one’s own traces (that is, in the traces – or tracks – that one now finds before oneself). Therefore, as much as the poem “Roses in cellophane...” inscribes itself into a colloquial sense of language, the poem

394 Ubertowska interprets this passage, in the context of the Heideggerian motif of the absence of the sacred, as intertextual trace (pp. 64-65).

“Einst hab ich die Muse gefragt” is a violation of colloquial language – or even a violation of the commonsensical way of thinking, since it speaks about an action that is impossible from a logical point of view. In the first poem, the trace is both behind the subject and before it; in the second, the trace is only before the subject. In both poems it is admittedly the subject who leaves the trace, but the first work speaks of the subject’s return and the second of his departure (and in the context of the “classic” Różewiczian motifs of absence, loss of sense, rootlessness³⁹⁵). “Einst hab ich die Muse gefragt” allows for the formulation of the paradoxical thesis that the trace of the subject precedes his presence. It is “before” him, in the sense that it constitutes the only possible form of presence for the person who is absent.

The subject does not only imprint his trace on the world, but he is also the place where the world is imprinted: “I am stubborn and submissive in my stubbornness, only thus can I imprint the world”; “every sign can be impressed on me, you are the stamp, and I the wax of the world.” The crucial context for the interpretation of these “trace” metaphors is the concept – which appears as early as Greek thought – of the mind as a wax tablet into which the traces (in the sense of *typos*) of reality are impressed, prior to the fully constituted image (*eidos*) of reality. It tends to imply the passivity of the mind, which is “exposed” to the action of the world, waiting for the world to move, receiving the world in itself, rather than imposing subjective projections onto the world, or actively shaping it, or freely constructing it according to its own imaginings.

Jacek Brzozowski interprets the trace imprinted by the world on the subject as the trace “of reality mediated through intersubjective experience and the world of daily life.”³⁹⁶ However, in my view, another interpretation of this trace is possible: as the imprint of that which is beyond language, discourse, the subjective; that which originates beyond the closed circle of cultural mediations – in other words, the real. This interpretation is legitimate when we treat the trace as a kind of wound or rift left in the subject by the world. Thus it would appear that this “traumatic” understanding of the trace has dominated Różewicz’s writings since at least the 1970s.³⁹⁷ In this interpretation, the wound would be the (only) way to get beyond mediated reality, though this would not mean reaching any traditionally understood transcendence. Instead, it would mean reaching through to the “real,” which might manifest itself in the form of the body as a peculiar subject of trauma or wounding: “Veils / like bandages /

395 See: Brzozowski, Jacek, “Mieszkaniec krainy bez światła,” *Dlaczego Różewicz: Wiersze i komentarze*, eds. J. Brzozowski and J. Poradecki (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1993).

396 Nycz, *Tekstowy świat*, p. 108.

397 Majchrowski, p. 214.

enveloped enfolded / concealed the wound of the body / how to extract / unhusk / from these veils / the words the gestures / how to bring out / your fleshliness / to reveal / your sex” (“zasypiając” P II 446).

Therefore, the relations between the “I” and the world are based on a subject-object paradigm that assumes activeness from the subject and passivity from the world as object. In other words, these relations are not based on representation as *Vor-stellung* (in the Heideggerian sense), but on a relation of “tracing,” which in Różewicz’s work takes the form of an equal exchange between the human being and the world, with both leaving traces on the other.

This emphasis on the significance of the trace in its various aspects – as a mode of man’s being in the world, of his experience of that world and his own subjectivity, but also as the shape taken by poetic form³⁹⁸ – is a consequence of all-embracing weakening of the substantiality of being, the power of language and the poetic image, and their ability to name the world. Finally, it is a consequence of the weakening of poetry itself. All that remains of these are the mere traces of presence.³⁹⁹ It is not easy to fully define the idea (or perhaps metaphor) of the trace such that it might serve as a precise, functional instrument for describing the textual “I” – let us call it the “weak ‘I’” – and its new status. This status differs both from the “strong” (essentialist) versions of subjectivity and from the “I” that has been depersonalized in the literature (and then “killed” in the theory) of the modern tradition. I would like to understand this “trace” form of the author’s presence in the text as a “portraying” of the subject (etymologically implying here both “traits,” as somebody’s characteristic features, and “traces” in the sense of marks left behind by damage or destruction). Here I am referring to Różewicz’s formulations in two poems: an untitled poem beginning with the line “All the images I ordered...” (“Wszystkie obrazy kazałem...” PII 455-456) and “The Mirror” (“Zwierciadło”) from the volume *Always the Fragment: Recycling (Zawsze fragment. Recykling)*.⁴⁰⁰

398 Nycz, *Tekstowy świat*, p. 109.

399 Januszkiewicz, p. 56.

400 In my interpretations of the idea of the “trait,” I allude to the reflections of Heidegger and Derrida. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger talks about *Riss* (translated from the German as “rift,” but – as in Polish – also potentially meaning “scratch,” “mark,” “outline,” or “trait”) in an ontological context not directly related to the existence of the subject. He treats the *Riss* as a place of conflict, but also as the place of the mutual belonging and reconciliation of the earthly and the worldly, the closed and the open, the hidden and the revealed (in other words, the absent and the present). Therefore, truth – understood as *aletheia* – is not the representation but rather the “portraying” of being. In his reflections on the self-portrait and self-representation of the subject (*Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. P.A. Brault and M. Naas [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993]), Derrida uses the idea of the trait (*trait*) in the senses

The first of these poems posits the ruin of the image as the traditional building block of poetic speech, destroyed by the speaker himself (“All the images I ordered to be killed”) and by the exhaustion of language as a mythical “inner speech” allowing for transparent communication with oneself (inner speech is deprived of its wings, blind). This means that the subject of the text is not represented, named, or captured in an image or word, but given as a trait, mark, or trace: “in a few poems you can read the traits.” According to Różewicz’s polysemic poetics, this mark allows for at least two different kinds of readings. On the one hand, it can be read as the traits of somebody’s face (the outline, features, or traits characteristic of somebody or something) and thus as a kind of self-*portrait*, self-presentation, a manifesting of oneself precisely in the text (in the “few poems”). The trait, mark or trace is one mode of existence for a subject who recognizes neither himself nor others close to him (“who recognizes him / mother brothers / maybe the other woman whose face / in the foggy mirror / streams like rain / for this is not an image / of your inside”). Nor is he capable of self-identification in the act of introspection and recollection (or perhaps “re-remembering”): “and you alone / staring at yourself / tell me what you see / I don’t know / I don’t remember”.

On the other hand, the “trait” can be a mark or trace on something (at least in Polish), a scratch or blemish – small but difficult to remove. This kind of trait as mark is semantically related to the imprint, but also to the wound or to damage. Therefore, if it is to be a kind of *portrait*, or self-*portrait*, then it must necessarily be “trace-like,” deficient and “weak” in nature. The traits, or marks, can also be read. Therefore, the trace is legible, comprehensible, endowed with meaning, a kind of subjective signature. However, this subjectivity is constituted – and the possibility of its expression or communication is determined – precisely by its reference to the wound, weakness, damage, and deficiency, rather than by permanence, wholeness, fullness and perfection.

The “portraying” or “tracing” of the subject – as a mode of its existence – is emphasized even more strongly in “The Mirror.” The problem of the self-presentation of the authorial “I” is taken up here in several ways: through a dialogue with one of Rembrandt’s late self-portraits, and through the themes of the mirror and the face. The mirror does not give a faithful and complete reflection. It is not a neutral medium of representation. It succumbs to destruction in time, appears to change or age together with the human being. Once it was “lively and young,” while now it is “blackened and dead.” In the

of both feature and trace, or sign. He also refers to meanings associated with erasure or withdrawal (*re-trait*). In Italian, *ritrato* means both withdrawn and recreated, or portrayed (ibid., p. 3).

past it harbored the poet's face, now it is deprived of his reflection – in other words, it represents nothing. The reflections of poems are silent as well. We might understand this as the exhaustion of language's ability to name the world and to give expression to the subject, but also as a liberation from the contaminated language of colloquial communication, with its "useless questions and answers." The mirror has hidden the face, burying it within itself. Therefore, it has caused the disappearance of the face, along with a weakening of the subject's sense of identity. The subject only apparently sees the same face in the mirror, since the face itself has undergone enormous change, and he can hardly recognize himself in it ("the face I see now / I saw at the beginning / but I did not foresee it"). By contrast, Rembrandt is revealed in his late self-portrait. His advanced age is like a return to childhood, which is emphasized by the metaphor "in the swaddling bands of old age." Activeness is also on his side. The image speaks, seeming to underline the superiority of painting to poetry ("why didn't you remain / a mute painter").⁴⁰¹ To a certain extent, the speaker, or subject, of the poem identifies with Rembrandt's self-portrait. He speaks of a "common face" – painterly and poetic self-portraits of an elderly artist.⁴⁰² This face is both *portrayed* and marked by the traits or traces left by time's destructive action. The etymological connotations here further underline the ambiguity of the word "trait" (especially in Polish) – as the wrinkles on a face, marks of destruction, and as the traits or features of a face constituting the painterly or poetic *self-portrait*.

Precisely at this point we may perceive most clearly the subtle, though still crucial difference between nihilism and weak ontology based on the trace. I wish to present this difference in a manner contrary to Vattimo, who closely identifies his *pensiero debole* with nihilism. The "trait" and "portraying" certainly do not represent any return to a "strong" subject or an attempt to reconstruct such a subject. And yet they cannot be identified with the complete annihilation or absence of this subject. This is particularly apparent in Różewicz's work from the 1960s and 1970s (perhaps beginning with the poem "Anonymous Voice" ["Głos anonima"], in which the "erasing of traits" is a consequence of a long shaping of self "in the image and likeness of nothing") through such motifs as the "I" transformed into a "black hole" (PII 346), "faces

401 Perhaps this phrase might be read as a reference to the well-known saying attributed to Simonides of Ceos that poetry is a painting that speaks, while painting is a poetry that is silent.

402 On Rembrandt's late work, see: Wallis, Mieczysław, *Późna twórczość wielkich artystów* (Warszawa: PIW, 1975), pp. 64-71. On the idea of the elderly poet, see: Skrendo, Andrzej, "Starzy poeci i nowa rzeczywistość-Miłosz i nie tylko," *Poezja modernizmu: Interpretacje* (Kraków: Universitas, 2005).

erased / smudged” (“Biała jak kreda” PII 385), or the face that “shrinks / wrinkles shrivels up ... falls apart / in my hands” (“Opowiadanie traumatyczne” PII 407), the face that falls away into nothing (“Koniec” PII 268).

Therefore, “de-facement” as the annihilation of the “I” and its individual voice in the space of the text⁴⁰³ may be juxtaposed with “portraying” understood as the return of the subject, though in a weak form far removed from essentialist notions. At the same time, it should be emphasized that this weak form cannot be reduced to nihilism (in the sense of the complete desubstantialization of the “I”). The subject as trace, trait, mark or wound represents a weakened subject, though still not an “I” turned into nothing, into a black hole, as Różewicz himself had earlier described it (PII 346, 356). Admittedly, this is a split, fragmentary subject, deprived of any unambiguous, full identity that might be treated as a whole. Nevertheless, this subject strives to construct itself (or rather to cobble itself together – once again to emphasize the sense of “shoddiness”), though not from what is permanent. Instead, the subject tries to construct itself from what is imperfect, accidental, meager – from its own traces and remnants, from what has not found its place within the fixed models of subjectivity and authorship.

403 De Man, Paul, “Autobiography as De-facement,” *MLN* 94.5 “Comparative Literature” (Dec. 1979), pp. 919-930.

IV. OTHER FORMS OF IMITATION/ TRACING: DANCE, MIME, ORNAMENT

“Only in dance do I know how to speak the parables of the highest things”:⁴⁰⁴

The Metaphor of Dance in the Modernist Tradition

Dance is an art form that is strongly linked to the beginnings of human culture⁴⁰⁵. It played an important role in the original experience of the sacred, in magic rituals, shamanism, and techniques of ecstasy⁴⁰⁶. In Ancient Greece, *choreia* was among the most important elements of social life⁴⁰⁷. Greek thinkers viewed dance from a mimetic perspective. For instance, in his *Dialogue on Dancing*, Lucian of Samosata saw as the objective of the art of dance both the imitation of various forms and the faithful representation of spiritual life. Christian tradition demonstrated an ambivalent attitude towards dance: on the one hand, it was condemned as arousing excessive sensuality, while on the other

404 See: Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

405 See: S. Dzikowski, *O tańcu. Rozważania kulturalno-obyczajowe* (Warszawa, 1925); J. Gluziński, *Taniec i zwyczaj taneczny* (Lwów, 1927); *Taniec. Monografia zbiorowa*, ed. by M. Gliński, vol. 1-2 (Warszawa, 1930); J. Rey, *Taniec, jego rozwój i formy*, trans. By I. Turska (Warszawa 1958); J.G. Noverre, *Teoria i praktyka tańca prostego i komponowanego, sztuki baletowej, muzyki, kostiumu i dekoracji*, trans. by I. Turska (Wrocław, 1959); G. van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty* (New York, 1963); E. Lhose-Claus, *Tanz in der Kunst* (Leipzig, 1964); J.L. Hanna, *Toward a Cross –Cultural Conceptualization of Dance*, in: *The Performing Arts*, ed. J. Blocking (The Hague, 1979); I. Turska, *Krótki zarys historii tańca i baletu* (Warszawa, 1983); G. Reni, *Storia Della danza* (Firenze, 1983); R. Lange, *O istocie tańca i jego przejawach w kulturze. Perspektywa antropologiczna* (Kraków, 1988); M. Lurker, *Przesłanie symboli w mitach, kulturach i religiach*. trans. R. Wojnakowski (Kraków, 1994); *Taniec i literatura*, eds. E. Czapelejewicz and J. Potkański (Pułtusk- Warszawa, 2002).

406 See: M. Eliade, *Szamanizm i archaiczne techniki ekstazy*, trans. by K. Kocjan (Warszawa, 1994).

407 See: T. Zieliński, S. Srebrny, *Literatura starożytnej Grecji epoki niepodległości* (Warszawa, 1923); E. Zwolski, *Choreia: muza i bóstwo w religii greckiej* (Warszawa, 1978).

hand, some Christian writers, such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, saw dance as the movement of angels around God.⁴⁰⁸ Perhaps dance's strongest imprint was left in the Indian religious imagination. One of the most important names for Shiva is Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, who, through his seven dances – called the *tandava* – creates, maintains and dissolves the world.

Also from India comes one of the oldest treatises on dance – Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, dated between the second and fifth centuries CE. The first European treatises devoted to dance date back to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Modern philosophical aesthetics does not devote much space to dance; the aesthetic category most often invoked to describe it is grace (*charis*; *venustas*; *gratia*).

The end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries was a time of the revival of dance as an art form – following a period of a certain ossification and conventionalization in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This revival took place under the significant influence of modernists and avant-garde trends in the visual arts, especially impressionism, constructivism, expressionism, futurism and cubism, and also resulted from the activity of eminent reformers of dance and ballet. Among these were the Americans Loie Fuller (1862-1928), who introduced electric light to her arrangements and composed them as a play of colors, lights and shadows, and Isadora Duncan (1878-1927), who performed in Europe and the USA in the first two decades of the twentieth century and broke with classical ballet conventions. Duncan was a pioneer of free dance, based on natural movements as an expression of human emotions and sensuality. These reformers also included Russians: the dancer and choreographer Mikhail Fokin (1880-1942), who in 1914 drew up and published five principles of ballet reform, and Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), founder and director of a ballet group that popularized Russian music, dance and ballet in the West, putting on shows in most European capitals at the beginning of the century. Diaghilev later worked with eminent avant-garde painters (including Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Miró and Derain) on the stage design for his productions.

Dance and dancers became a highly important and popular motif of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century painting, from impressionism to the avant-garde of the turn of the century. Degas in particular specialized in painting female dancers (*Blue Dancers*; *The Dance Class*; *Dancer*; *Dancers*; *Dancer on Stage*; *Ballet*; *The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*), while dance was also an important motif in many of the works of Renoir (*Dance at Le moulin de la*

408 See: Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, trans. John Parker (London: Skeffington, 1897).

Galette) and Toulouse-Lautrec (poster depicting the dancer Jane Avril). There continued to be a noticeable interest in dance as a motif in later painting as well – for example, in the work of Munch, Matisse, Derain, Braque, Picasso and many other modern painters.

The interest in dance in modernism was also influenced by the ideas of Nietzsche, who may truly be called a philosopher of dance, since he devoted so much attention to it, placing and interpreting it in so many different contexts. In his early writings, including “The Dionysiac World View,” dance appears in the context of the opposition of Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Dance was originally Dionysian in character, and Bacchic dances introduced an element of impetuosity and excess to the calm and simple Apollonian music. Moreover, dance, or “the gesture of dance,” constituted a distinct example and intensification of the language of gestures, which had a visual character, thus referring to the world of phenomena or illusions, in contrast to the languages of concepts or intonation, which – thanks to their rhythmicity and dynamism – reached beyond the world of phenomena to the essence of being: “When he uses gesture man remains within the limits of the species, which is to say, within the limits of the phenomenal world; when he produces musical sound, however, he dissolves the phenomenal world, as it were, into its original unity; the world of maya disappears before the magic of music.”⁴⁰⁹ The Dionysian human, who was at once a dancer, singer and poet, therefore lived in immediate proximity to nature, participating in the world intuitively and sensually without the need for any conceptual mediation. Yet when dance and song became part of the tragic spectacle, they lost their original unity, while dance lost its direct character and became a means of symbolic communication. The original model is reversed here: it is dance that leads the way to the visual, representative, and therefore Apollonian arts, while sound leads to lyric and music.

Nietzsche was interested in dance not only from the aesthetic point of view, but also as a strong metaphor referring generally to everything carnal and sensual in the human being. In his provocative gestures to reverse the traditional, Platonic and Christian dualism of spirit-body, he often uses the metaphor of dance to accentuate the grandeur, dignity and – so to speak – wisdom of the carnal element in the human being. In the “dancing body,”⁴¹⁰ the capacity for lively movement, to leap and keep time, is an expression of lightness, suppleness, fitness, cheerfulness, as well as energy, power, a sense of strength and discipline, self-control, and finally grace, refinement and a charm

409 Nietzsche, Friedrich, “The Dionysiac World View,” *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999), p. 136.

410 See: Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

characterizing dignified and noble people. The term “dancer” is usually applied to Zarathustra, whose greatest enemy is the spirit of gravity, symbolizing obligation, sadness, destination, will, good and evil – that is, the metaphysical concepts on which traditional ethics, particularly Christian ethics, were based. Zarathustra contrasts this with his dancing virtue, which constitutes a liberation from fear and the sense of guilt or punishment. This virtue is based on the affirmation of the sensual-carnal side of the human being, bringing it closer to the Renaissance *virtú* – virtue as power, full of the value of the individual.

An important role in Nietzsche’s work is played by the metaphor of dancing in chains, portraying the relationship in art between compulsion and freedom.⁴¹¹ Dancing in chains does not mean the anarchic rejection of all conventions and limitations, but the capacity to take control of them and conquer them so that what is imposed (such as artistic conventions) in effect becomes something natural, easy, unforced, and constitutes the measure of the artist’s power and capacity. It is worth noting at this point that Gombrowicz is clearly a dancer from Nietzsche’s ballet school. Gombrowicz’s dance metaphor describing higher culture, his metaphor of the lightness of dance directed against that which is serious and heavy, dance as a metaphor for philosophy and a specific writing strategy, and also the application of the metaphor of dance in a somatic context, were all inspired by Nietzsche’s work, particularly in the metaphor of dancing in chains. Dancing Form is a metaphor for Form as a whole: “I am like a voice in an orchestra that must tune itself to the orchestra’s sound, find its place within the melody or, like a dancer for whom it is not so important exactly what is danced, but rather to join in the dance with others.”⁴¹² Metaphorically, dance characterizes Gombrowicz’s approach to culture and the whole “higher sphere.” Dance is a strategy for loosening the restrictions formed by tradition, alleviating the oppressive character of serious and mature art forms. It constitutes a defensive gesture in the name of the sovereignty of the subject, which is threatened by alienation through its own cultural products, as well as an attempt to regain a free attitude towards them: “But I danced in chains, oh, what crushing pressure, what a hundred-pound weight!”; “I too am a little bit of a dancer and this perversion (approaching what is ‘hard’ in an ‘easy’ way) suits me very well. I believe that it is one of the foundations of my literary talent.”⁴¹³

Nietzsche too applies the metaphor of dance to thinking and writing as inseparable attributes of the noble soul: “thinking has to be learned as dancing

411 See: Nietzsche, Friedrich, “The Wanderer and His Shadow,” *Human, All Too Human* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

412 Gombrowicz, Witold, *Dziennik* (Vol. 1), p. 303.

413 *Ibid.*, (Vol. 3), p. 189; (Vol. 1), p. 323.

requires to be learned, as a form of dancing ... [...] no form of dancing can be excluded from a high-class education – ability to dance with the feet, with concepts, and with words [...].”⁴¹⁴ This quotation seems difficult to interpret. After all, what characteristics of thinking and writing have anything to do with “dance,” or with realizing the ideal of the lightness or grace of dance, as Nietzsche conceives them? Perhaps it means thought that ceases to strive for a comprehensive, systematic and scientific grasping of reality, or ceases to close reality in rigid, unambiguous conceptual schemes. Instead, it would represent a thought closer to perspectivism, invention, interpretation, expressed not in the form of the treatise, summa, or encyclopedia, but rather in open, fragmentary forms closer to the literary text than to the traditional philosophical thesis. This is the direction in which Giles Deleuze’s commentary appears to go when he sees in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* not only a conceptual work but also a work realizing and imposing on readers an almost sensual strategy of reception, according to which they do not so much interpret the meaning contained within the text as dance with the text, so to speak, and performatively co-create it: “*Zarathustra* is conceived entirely within philosophy, but also entirely for the stage. Everything in it is scored and visualized, put in motion and made to walk or dance.”⁴¹⁵

In modernist literature, dance often appears as a metaphor for the text, the sign, or poetic semiosis, liberated from the “oppression” of the unequivocal sign, or meaning in general with its consolidated orders. Words or signs that are free, ambiguous and fluid – building surprising and new semantic systems under petrified symbolic systems, and exhibiting the material nature and sensuality of the signifier at the expense of the concept (the signified, the idea) – are often compared to dance. As Fernando Pessoa writes, “There is prose that dances, sings and recites to itself. There are verbal rhythms with a sinuous choreography, in which the idea being expressed strips off its clothing with veritable and exemplary sensuality. And there are also, in prose, gestural subtleties carried out by a great actor, the Word, which rhythmically transforms into its bodily substance the impalpable mystery of the universe.”⁴¹⁶

In the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Crayonné au théâtre* (1897), dance is a figure of poetic semiosis. However, he tends to emphasize the full unity of the *signifiant* and *signifié* in the poetic word. The body of the woman dancer, of

414 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Twilight of the Idols and The Antichrist*, trans. Thomas Common (Digireads.com Publishing, 2009), pp. 30-31.

415 Deleuze, Gilles, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 10.

416 Pessoa, Fernando, *The Book of Disquiet*, ed. and trans. Richard Zenith (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 126.

whom Mallarmé writes paradoxically that she is neither a woman nor dancing, is the signifying, material element of the sign in which the “visual embodiment of the idea”⁴¹⁷ takes place – that is, the complete merging of the signifier with the signified, thanks to which the conceptual sphere attains the character of the sensual concrete, and poetic language is capable of perceiving what is essential without losing any of its sensuality. Jean-Pierre Richard views the metaphor of the dancer in Mallarmé as follows: “The body [of the dancer] in reality does not constitute a material element, but rather successfully unites in itself matter and meaning”; “The signifier, the word or image, is united with the signified, the fact from the field of nature, to create a poetic meaning, which Mallarmé would call the ‘pure notion.’”⁴¹⁸

Dance for Mallarmé is characterized by ethereality, instability and suspension. The dancer herself wavers between her own femininity and that which she is presenting. This ambiguous quality of dance is noted by Derrida, who interprets it as a metaphor for writing (*écriture*), which is semantically indeterminate, suspended between various orders of meaning, and circulating between various texts.⁴¹⁹ Derrida interprets the movement of dance as the movement of semiosis, which is never closed or complete, in which one signifier always refers to other signifiers, without ultimately allowing meaning to be attained: “The cipher of pirouettes is also the pirouette as a cipher, as the movement of the signifier that refers, through the fiction of this or that visible dancing pirouette, to another pirouetting signifier, another ‘pirouette.’ ... Each pirouette is then, in its twirling, only the mark of another pirouette, totally other and yet the same.”⁴²⁰

Similar ideas appear in Paul Valéry’s 1937 essay “La philosophie de la danse.” According to this French poet, dance as art has a unique status, since it is the extension of life itself and makes possible the full realization of the kinetic potential of the human body. The movement of dance is open, potentially infinite, dynamic, a kind of autotelic game and representation with no other objective than itself, a pure process that does not lead to the formation of any product different from itself. As a metaphor of language, though, dance refers to the deautomatization of consolidated meanings thanks to the bold placing together of concepts that are semantically distant from one another: “What is a metaphor,

417 Mallarmé, Stéphane, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 306.

418 Richard, Jean-Pierre, *L’Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1961), pp. 411, 417.

419 Derrida, Jacques, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981), pp. 247-248.

420 *Ibid.*, pp. 249.

if not a kind of pirouette, in which various images or various words are brought closer?”⁴²¹

In the work of Bolesław Leśmian – both his poetry and essays – dance occupies a great deal of space both as a thematic motif and as an important metaphor. The many meanings of dance and everything that goes with it – playing with death and danger, dancing over a chasm as a metaphor for life suspended in a vacuum, with no support (“Pantera”, “Metafizyka”) – have their roots in Nietzsche. Dance displays a rather different character – perhaps realizing the Dionysian-Orpheusian archetype of *membra disiecta* – in the poem “Świdryga i Midryga” (“Svidryga and Midryga”), in which the limbs of a chopped-up farmhand perform a grotesque dance. A traditional idea of the dance of life and death can be found in the poem “W pobliżu cmentarza” (“Near the Cemetery”). Leśmian also alluded to the motif of the *choreia* in such poems as “Łąka” (“Meadow”) and an untitled poem opening with “Ciało me, wklęte w korowód istnienia” (“My body, sunken into the procession of existence”). Leśmian interprets the world and the whole of being as *choreia*, and refers to the “procession of existence,” “stellar jigs of the universes of dancing,” in which the human body, closely united with it, also participates.

Leśmian is linked to the French symbolists by his use of dance as a metaphor for poetic language, in which the freshness and directness of the sensual experience of the world, lost in conceptual language, has been returned, and which is strongly contrasted to colloquial language: “Drunk on the rhythm [of the word], they dance to show their joyful liberation from the tethers of grayness and conceptuality – to show the wonderful return to the original source of colors, shapes, swooshes and rustles”; “These danced, sung, free and rebellious words break any liaison they may have with the words of everyday speech, and put into a dancing whirl only those thought and feelings, only those dreams and apparitions that begin to exist, and to be themselves, only in this liberation – in this *verbal manifestation* – in this triumphant towering over the uncreative and dead, though busy and raucous, day-to-day existence.”⁴²²

Finally, in modernist poetry we can also find reinterpretations of one of the oldest ideas about dance – with its roots dating back to Antiquity – as a cosmic *choreia* or expression of the order and harmony of the universe. Among others, we find this in the work of Rilke (“Sonnet XXVIII” from the second part of *Sonnets to Orpheus*), William Butler Yeats (“All Souls’ Night”), Gottfried Keller (“Little Legend of the Dance”), Tadeusz Miciński (“Prayer”), Leśmian

421 Valéry, Paul, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 1403.

422 Leśmian, Bolesław, *Szkice literackie* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1959), p. 84.

(“After the Rain,” the aforementioned “My body, sunken...,” and “Meadow”). However, the modernist *choreia* is constantly threatened by collapse as a result of the disintegration or disappearance of the center of both the universe and the human being – and the release of that which is irrational, ecstatic and primeval (Wallace Stevens’ “On an Old Horn” and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”; Jan Wroczyński’s “Gawoty gwiazdne” [“Astral Gavottes”]).

Dance appears as a liberation of the carnal, erotic, biological and sensual in the human being, which are stifled by the rational element. Dance appears as sensual, direct cognition of the world, as opposed to rational cognition or abstract objectivizing of reality. Dance also appears as a metaphor for the signifying element, full of its sensual concreteness and freed from the authority of consolidated orders of meaning. These would appear to be the most important contexts in which the modernists situated dance, both as an important subject of their writings and as a crucial and resonant ontological and epistemological metaphor – a metaphor that refers to writing, the text and literature. Understood as a metaphor of imitation, dance refers to the original meanings of mimesis (which are, incidentally, connected precisely with ritual dance), as presentation, manifestation, evocation, but not to imitation as “duplication,” copying, or representation of a pre-existing and given reality.

Mime and Mimesis: Mime and Pantomime in Modern Literary Consciousness

motto:

“Just as a painter isn’t a photographer
a mime isn’t a monkey.”

Étienne Decroux

Mime and pantomime are theatrical genres with a long and rich tradition, going back to Antiquity.⁴²³ They are often included in the so-called second stream of theater, drawing from the traditions of folk and circus performances and shows at fairs – the rich repertoire of popular forms, developing in parallel with the “high” varieties of dramatic and theatrical art. It is no easy task to identify the beginnings of pantomime in ancient Greece: it is usually traced to generally improvised generic scenes of a comic, farcical or parodic nature. The ancient mime artist was on the whole not mute: the actors appearing in pantomimes – or at least in certain forms of them – performed monologues or sometimes even dialogues.

Literary mime began in Sicily, where Sophron of Syracuse is seen as its most eminent representative. The Doric comedy, from Magna Graecia and represented by Epicharmus, was a close relative of pantomime, as were the farcical scenes performed by actors known as *deikelists*, *phlyaks*, *phallogofors*, *autocabdals*. Roman mime too – known from the work of artists including Laberius, Matius, and Publilius Syrus – is closely linked to popular forms of theater, such as the *fabula togata* and *fabula atellana*.

Purely literary mime – not intended for the stage and written in elaborate verse – was fully developed in the Hellenistic era. Some of the Idylls of Theocritus are described, depending on the place of the action, as urban or rural mimes. The most eminent exponent of literary mime is considered to be Herodas, whose *Mimes* are generic scenes of a realistic and naturalistic character.⁴²⁴

423 The Greek word *mimos* means both the act of imitation and the imitator himself, cf. *Słownik pisarzy antycznych*, ed. Anna Świderkówna (Warszawa: WP, 1982), pp. 316 – 317. On the subject of the ancient pantomime tradition, see also: Srebrny, Stefan, “Początki komedii attyckiej” and “Grecki teatr jarmarczny,” *Teatr grecki i polski*, ed. Szczepan Gąsowski, introduction Jerzy Łanowski (Warszawa: Państwowy Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984); Stankiewicz, Lucyna, “Rodzima twórczość komediowa w Rzymie. Fabula togata, atellana, mim,” *Dramat starożytny. Powszechne wykłady uniwersyteckie* (Wrocław: Wydaw. Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1984).

424 See: Herondas, *Mimes*, trans. Guy Davenport (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1981).

In the Middle Ages and in modern times, pantomime preserved its links with plebeian theater. However, its boundaries became significantly more fluid, as it became more similar to circus shows, acrobatics, burlesque, clowning, *commedia dell'arte*, and ballet and dance performances.⁴²⁵ It also seems that pantomime is most closely related to dance, although some authors make a clear distinction between mime and dance, while others, admittedly less radically, emphasize the similarities between them.⁴²⁶

In this section, I use the word “mime” to encompass both mimicry in its own right and certain forms of dance, gesture, and even movement in general – wherever the emphasis is on: 1) their function to represent and imitate reality in the broadest terms; 2) their characteristic means of referring to reality. A specialist in pantomime would doubtless be able to produce a number of well-justified reservations about such generalizations. I can employ two arguments to justify the approach I have adopted. Firstly, the object of my investigations in this analysis is not pantomime itself, its history, unique characteristics etc., but rather the interpretation of mime that can be found in a number of works written by eminent representatives of modern literature. I will attempt to show that we can see in the phenomenon of mime not merely an occasional theme appearing in certain texts, but also – and even above all – a kind of model for the modernist language of poetry and artistic representation as a whole. As a result, over the course of my discussion I will make use of the concept of the mimic model, whose legitimacy I will endeavor to explain towards the end of this outline. Secondly – and perhaps more significantly – in the works that I will analyze, there is no way to unambiguously and precisely define the boundary between dance and mime. In many cases, where the word “mime” (*mimika*) is used in these texts (Leśmian’s *Dramaty mimiczne* [*Mime Dramas*]; Kisielewski’s *O sztuce mimicznej* [*The Art of Mime*]), they are in fact devoted to dance, in its various forms.

425 Janina Hera discusses the history of modern pantomime at length in her work *Z dziejów pantomimy czyli pałac zaczarowany* (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1975).

426 The former position is represented by Étienne Decroux in his book *The Art of Mime*, and the latter by Rudolf Slavsky, writing that “between ballet and pantomime there lie many more differences than common features”; See Slavski, Rudolf, *Sztuka pantomimy*, Polish trans. Jerzy Litwiniuk, introduction Aleksander Jochweld (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Związkowe CRZZ, 1965). However, Jochweld himself writes that “the commonality of ballet and pantomime is undeniable”, *ibid.*, p. 28. A similar position seems to be held by Hera, who uses the expression, “pantomimic dance” as well as “pantomimic narrative dance” (*op. cit.*, *passim*).

The Language of Movement: Mime and Pantomime in the Conceptions of the Framers of the Great Theater Reform

From around the middle of the nineteenth century, a significant change is detectable in the artistic perception of the status of the pantomime. It lost its previous association with exclusively popular, light and “low” entertainment, and started to become, at least in some varieties, ever more elite, and at the same time an object of interest for many eminent artists and art theoreticians, including Théophile Gautier and Théodore de Banville, who attempted to capture the specific nature of mime as an art, and of its particular means of artistic expression.⁴²⁷ This tendency became stronger in the late nineteenth century and at the turn of the twentieth century, in accordance with modernism’s attempt to establish differentiation and autonomization in the various arts, and reached its apogee in the manifestos and theoretical writings of the most eminent artists of the so-called Great Theater Reform. Striving to break with naturalism and endeavoring to free theater from its narrative character and the domination of literary text, it was precisely pantomime and mime that became the objects of their attention, since they saw in movement and corporality the right features of stage art to permit “pure” theatricality to be manifested. Most of the postulates formed at the beginning of the twentieth century in reformed theater concerning the fundamental role of movement, and in particular pantomime, would also be continued in various forms – with the emphasis on various aspects of the issue – in the 1920s and 1930s, and later all the way into the 1960s.

It seems at first glance that one can distinguish two main themes in reflections on mime (broadly understood). Of fundamental importance is the conception of stage movement as a kind of signifying system with an autonomous nature, which can be reduced neither to simple imitation of reality, nor to the role of a set of signs that act in an auxiliary manner to the word, and thus serve only to interpret the literary text, consolidate certain values, etc. The gesture is contrasted with: 1) the word, language as the proper means of expression for the theatre and art (Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, Jacques Copeau); and 2) more broadly, any discursiveness, as the original, authentic medium of communication able to convey and express that which escapes conceptual language (Edward Gordon Craig, Antonin Artaud, Henryk Tomaszewski). The first view places gesture in a rather expressive perspective: movement serves here as a means of artistic expression. The second view is dominated by the epistemological and anthropological understanding of gesture: movement is a means for cognition of reality and defines the place occupied in this reality by the subject. Finally, in the

427 Hera discusses the change in the conception of pantomime in the late nineteenth century in op. cit. pp. 244-245.

less radical version (Jean-Louis Barrault), the unity and inseparability of the art of the word and the art of gesture is proclaimed, thus pointing to their equal status as means of communication.⁴²⁸

Another problem, inextricably linked with questions of movement and gesticulation, is the issue of corporality: the body is understood as the material of stage art, as a source of aesthetic values, and – perhaps most interestingly and, at the same time, most problematically – as a source of meanings. These ideas were developed most fully in the works of Adolphe Appia and, somewhat later, the mime artist Étienne Decroux.

Among the Russian reformers of the theater, it was probably Vsevolod Meyerhold who devoted the most attention to pantomime, making a thorough analysis of the role played in the theater play by dance, gesture, and movement in general. Meyerhold viewed it as an appropriate means of expression for plays and indeed as a more perfect medium than the means of verbal communication: “Where the word loses its power of expression is where the language of dance starts”; “Perhaps some time in the future a law will appear on theater billboards: *words in the theater are just a dessert on the canvas of movement?*”; “The juggler proves that the actor’s art can transmit thoughts using the gesture and movement of the body, not just in dance, but through every stage action.”⁴²⁹

According to Meyerhold, the actor’s movement and gestures do not serve to imitate and copy reality outside the theater, but, on the contrary, constitute a means of overcoming realistic representation and demystifying the illusoriness of the performance, exhibiting its “artificiality” and autonomous nature. Theatrical movement is non-mimetic and autotelic, turning the performance into a domain of rhythmic order, which is contrasted in a decisive way with chaotic, unordered empirical reality. This anti-naturalistic tendency to unmask the mechanism of theatrical performance and reveal its conventional character is accompanied by the closely related tendency to use theatrical forms

428 A different position is represented by Roman Ingarden, who seems to deny gesture any autonomy and distinctness in relation to language: “Pantomime is based [...] on *saying*, through the mimicry and gesticulation of the performing personae, what could have been expressed more simply by words.” Cf. Ingarden, Roman *The Literary Work of Art*, trans. George Grabowicz (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1979), p. 328.

429 See: Wsiewołod (Vsevolod) Meyerhold, *Przed rewolucją (1905-1917)*, selection and introduction Jerzy Koenig, trans. Jerzy Koenig and Andrzej Drawicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1988), pp. 71, 154, 155. Meyerhold’s views on the communicational and expressive values of movement do not seem to be unambiguous. He wrote that dance “is an ingeniously shaped form which does not fulfill any cognitive functions (op. cit., p. 71), and thus viewed the art of dance from a purely formal, and not mimetic or expressive perspective.

uncontaminated (or less contaminated) by imitation- that is, those forms that precede the development of realism and naturalism, and those marginalized forms in which the basic features of the authentic theatrical phenomenon were preserved: “The contemporary director, discovering today the forms of ancient theater, takes on pantomime above all because the staging of these dramas without words opens before him, and before the actor, the opportunity to return to the most elementary means of expression of theatrical art: the mask, gesture, movement and intrigue.”⁴³⁰

The liberation of theater from its literary nature, from the primacy of textual material, was also proclaimed by Alexander Tairov, who demanded that pantomimic material in particular – equipped with its own characteristic rhythm and harmony – be recognized in the theater. Movement here is an autonomous element, entirely independent from the word, to which it plays the role of an alternative medium of communication: “No, pantomime is not a performance for deaf-mutes, where gestures play the role of words; pantomime is a performance on the level of a spiritual denuding, when *words die out* and in their place true theatrical action is born.”⁴³¹

The interest in non-verbal means of communication apparently resulted from the desire to purify the theater of its literary and narrative nature and to broaden the possibilities of expressive acting as an art. Another cause was the modernist crisis of language and discourse, which were subjected to critiques emerging from various philosophical assumptions – as petrified, reality-

430 Op. cit. p. 156.

431 See Tairov, Aleksander, *Notatki reżysera i proklamacje artysty*, trans. Janina Ludawska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1978), p. 46. Similar views are also proclaimed by Jacques Copeau, who speaks in favor of separating mime from the word, as well as from those forms of gesticulation which serve only to strengthen verbal expression. According to Copeau, pantomime should become an independent act, with a specific domain of phenomena that it intends to make into the objects of performance and its own means of expression. I refer to Copeau’s comments, included in a letter to Jouvert, from John Rudlin’s book *Jacques Copeau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 99. Among Polish theater critics, a similar view was expressed perhaps most forcibly by Ryszard Ordyński, who stressed the primacy of gesture and physical means of expression over the word, and – like Gordon Craig and the German theater reformer Georg Fuchs, for instance – derived the theater play from dance, understood in accordance with the principles of ancient aesthetics: “But I take the concept of dance here not in the modern and limited sense, but in the ancient and general one of the *pantomime*, that is as a play expressing diverse impressions with the aid of – to be precise I quote the original – ‘les attitudes, les mouvements et les gestes du corps,’” cf. Ordyński, Ryszard, “Gest czy słowo?”, *Mysł teatralna Młodej Polski*, eds. Irena Sławińska and Stefan Kruk (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1966), p. 341.

deforming systems of notions and categories incapable of getting through to that which is individual and unique. Probably the views most characteristic of this attitude were those of Antonin Artaud, who saw in gesture the language of direct understanding, which is also capable of capturing – or rather invoking and evoking – the sensory concrete, i.e. that which escapes discursive cognition.⁴³²

A similar view can be found, somewhat later, in the writings of Henryk Tomaszewski, according to whom the devaluation of the word in the modern world forces the artist to reach for non-verbal means of communication, such as gesture and movement, which show what words are unable to reveal.⁴³³

Movement also constituted an important element in Jean-Louis Barrault's conception of "total theater," which posited that theatrical means of expression be broadened by such acts as shouting, silence, breathing and gestures. Barrault contrasted purely imitative gesture, serving the development of the action, with "gesture as Everything in itself, gesture that itself constitutes the material of poetry, gesture creating poetry"⁴³⁴ – in other words, gesture perceived rather in the expressive categories typical of subjective mime and related to the art of oriental actors and the Greek theater.

Adolphe Appia referred in a direct way to the subject of pantomime and mime relatively seldom. However, many of the themes he developed are highly significant in terms of the ideas I am advancing here. The corporality of the actor and movement are fundamental elements of this Swiss director's theory of theater: "We desire all the more fervently for the body to become a foundation of artistic life: as elsewhere, in this field too, movement has become a pressing need; each art form wishes at all costs to express it."⁴³⁵ According to Appia, the body and movement form the basis for dramatic actions, as well as the artistic components of a show. The actor's living body is, first of all, a theatrical fact of fundamental and autonomous significance, exhausting itself in its own depth of being and lack of transparency, and thus unable to be reduced to the role of conveying and interpreting the textual, literary and ideological meanings that precede it. Secondly, the body is a phenomenon whose specific character involves its crossing the process/product dichotomy, since the actor's body here is the tool and material as well as the work itself. Importantly, the ontological status of the word also undergoes a change here, since, in becoming an element

432 See: Artaud, Antonin, *The Theater and its Double*, trans. Mary C. Richard (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

433 "Rozmowy o dramacie. Tomaszewskiego teatr ruchu," *Dialog* 10 (1969), p. 121.

434 Barrault, Jean-Louis, "Concerto pour homme," *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 1 (1958), pp. 46-47.

435 Appia, Adolphe, *Dzieło sztuki żywej i inne prace*, trans. various (Warszawa: WAIiF, 1974), p. 131 [Adolphe Appia, *The Work of Living Art* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1960).].

of a living work of art, it loses the practical function designated by popular usage, and acquires independence and the ability to have an active effect: it “escapes,” is “liberated,” “summons the artist alone,” “speaks a new language.”⁴³⁶

Norwid, Mallarmé, Leśmian: Mime as the Representation of a Representation

Without a doubt, among the most important pieces of evidence for the interest in the pantomime and mime in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is provided by Stéphane Mallarmé’s short essay “Mimique.”⁴³⁷ Among the many ideas presented in this semantically rich and difficult work, the theme of silence – perceived as a peculiar system of communication of equal rank to poetic language – played an important role. Silence is an integral component of mime constituting a “mute soliloquy” and compared to an “as yet unwritten page.” This precedence of mime in relation to linguistic representation means that mime’s typical way of imitating attains the character of original, authentic mimesis. Mime is a genre “that is closer to the beginnings (*principes*) than any other.”

However, the acting of a mime artist and the symbol of mime are characterized by the constant operation of allusiveness: suspended between desire and fulfillment, accomplishment and recollection, past and present, never reaching the meaning, the object of its performance, only giving the “false appearance of presence.”

In his exhaustive commentary on Mallarmé’s one-page text, Jacques Derrida interprets the art of mime as a figure of representation and certain aporias

436 Ibid. It seems that the themes of silence and sculpture are close to the questions outlined here. The role of silence in the theater is emphasized among others by Meyerhold (op. cit., p. 39) and Barrault (op. cit. pp. 51, 52). Rudolf Slavsky refers to the organic nature of silence in mime (op. cit. p. 42). According to Meyerhold (op. cit. pp. 52, 55), sculpture, or rather, if we may say so, “sculpturality,” constitutes a kind of model both for an actor’s actions and for the whole stage composition, designating a kind of rhythm for it. Georg Fuchs, meanwhile, wrote that “the course of dramatic action takes place in rapid series of convex statues” (op. cit. p. 45). The observations of Norwid can thus be seen as precursors to modernist theatrical conceptions, referring to the “wordless moments” in a drama and its leading into sculpture. See: Norwid, Cyprian Kamil, “Białe kwiaty,” *Pisma wszystkie*, ed. and introduction Juliusz Gomulicki (Warszawa 1971), vol. VI, pp. 191-192.

437 All quotations from Mallarmé, Stéphane, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 310.

connected with it. According to the French philosopher's interpretation, mime does not imitate either external reality – whether ideal or empirical – or internal, psychological reality; neither does it establish presence in the original sense. Therefore, the imitative actions of mime are located in neither the classical nor the alethic understanding of truth or mimesis. By taking up the game of performance and imitation, and never seeing it through to the end, the mime reveals the illusory character of the dichotomous categories on which mimesis is based, such as the thing and representation, what imitates and what is imitated, the signifier and the signified. In effect, "Mime imitates (*mime*) the reference. It is not an imitator, it imitates the imitation."⁴³⁸ Mime – imitating not the product, but the process of imitation – seems to function here as the reverse of the mimesis of process, understood as imitation not of the product but of the action of producing.

Derrida's reading of Mallarmé's text thus views it as a treatise on literature,⁴³⁹ on the mimeticism (or rather non-mimeticism) of the literary text. Leśmian's *Mimic Dramas*, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a treatise on the modern crisis of performance.

Mimesis, acts of representation and imitation, are thematized in Leśmian's pantomimes frequently and in various ways.⁴⁴⁰ Two ideas are of particular importance here: the mirror image (SO 188) and the painting of the portrait, which appears twice in both mimic dramas (SO 130, 139, 176, 189).

The traditional semantics of the mirror image, which can legitimately be identified as a paradigm, a model of non-semiotic, faithful representation with no mediation, is clearly undermined and questioned in *Skrzypek opętany* (*The Frenzied Fiddler*). First, between that which is represented (the character of Chryza) and the representation (Chryza's reflection in the mirror) there is a temporal distance: "Then – in the depths of the mirror, with a certain delay, appears the reflection of Chryza herself" (SO 188). Subsequently, the entire logical and temporal order of the process of imitation is reversed. The character looking at herself in the mirror imitates the movements of her own reflection. The original is thus secondary to the copy, even despite the fact that for a moment the actions of the character and her mirror image become – as in

438 Derrida, Jacques, *La dissemination* (Paris, Seuil: 1971), p. 270. Derrida's interpretation of the problem of mimesis in Mallarmé's text is discussed by, among others, Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf in *Mimesis, Culture, Art, Society*, op cit., pp. 300-302; Zofia Mitosek in the essay "Koniec mimesis?" (in: *Mimesis. Zjawisko i problem*, op. cit. pp. 156-161); and Michał P. Markowski in the book *Efekt inskrypcji. Jacques Derrida i literatura* (Bydgoszcz: Homini, 1997), pp. 235-246.

439 Derrida, *La dissemination*, p. 275.

440 Quotations from *Skrzypek opętany* (*The Frenzied Fiddler*), ed. and introduction Rochelle H. Stone (Warszawa: PIW, 1985) are identified in the text using the abbreviation "SO."

common-sense experience – simultaneous: “The movements of Chryza and her Reflection – though neither entirely in accordance with, nor the reverse of, the laws of the real hierarchy – attain at a certain point simultaneity, despite the precedence of the Reflection, so that the copies of the wreath, necklace and belt fall to the ground at the same time as their counterparts beyond the mirror” (SO 189). Finally, the reflection gains autonomy, becoming independent of the original, no longer imitating anything: “*Chryza’s reflection* raises its hands higher towards its face, covers its face with them and cries soundlessly in the depths of the mirror” (SO 189).

Both *The Frenzied Fiddler* and *Pierrot i Kolombina* (*Pierrot and Columbine*) begin with a scene featuring the painting of a portrait – the second of the two “mimetic” motifs identified here. Despite certain rather insignificant differences between its various realizations, this motif is fairly consistent in its main features. The act of painting turns out to be essentially camouflaged dance, or rhythmic movement, which appears as more original than pictorial representation, allowing it to develop: “Columbine stands at the easel, with a brush and a black palette in hand, and rhythmically, in time to the music, paints a portrait of Pierrot. [...] She paints, dances” (SO 130).⁴⁴¹ Therefore, we find here two models of representation, or conceptions of mimesis, confronting each other: the static, painterly model, treating reality as lasting, stable, preceding its artistic representation and, as a result, imitable; and the dynamic model of dance, or, more broadly, movement, based on acting together, interaction, participation in reality. The latter – though it has an originary character and permits representation to occur – itself constitutes an element of unrepresentability and negativity: “Yet dance is hidden and imperceptible” (SO 130); “dance that cannot be perceived by the eye” (SO 136, 184); “the imperceptible dance of movements” (SO 148); “guarded dance” (SO 151, 197, 207); “dead movement” (SO 206); “suppressed movement” (SO 203); “a crouching shiver” (SO 148).

Therefore, dance can be recognized as a model for authentic poetic expression – more perfect than the painterly model, whose classical form is Horace’s phrase *ut picture poesis*, the veristic model of the mirror image expressed in Stendhal’s metaphor of the mirror passing along the highway,⁴⁴² but also more perfect than language itself: “Dance – does not require words...”;

441 It is worth noting that a similar picture appears in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1994, p. 118) “And so pausing and flickering, she attained a dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another, and all were related.”

442 See: Stendhal, *The Red and the Black*, trans. Roger Gard (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), Chapter 49.

“*Silence and soundlessness* are an indomitable principle of mimic drama” (SO 234). However, movement – as a synonym for uncontaminated, direct communication, and in contrast with language as an imperfect medium – can still function as a semantic universal, or a signifying system, though in a privileged ontological situation different from the normal order of being: “The thing happens in those interstices of existence where there are no words and everyone understands each other” (SO 174).

For an interpretation of the phenomenon of mimesis in *The Frenzied Fiddler* – as well as the concept of representation – scenes 5 and 6 of the first hallucination are fundamentally significant. Alaryel first tries to decipher the musical score written on the robes of Rusalka, the water nymph, and then to play the tune on the fiddle. But both attempts are doomed to failure. The text of the score – which is compared with “intricate arabesques, hiding an unknown song” (SO 180) and thus with a complicated cipher concealing a deeply encoded meaning – cannot be deciphered: “the mysterious notes mix together lambently, melting powerlessly into a single golden glow – illegible and indistinguishable in its golden details” (SO 181). Every attempt to play the musical phrase on the fiddle, to recreate it, proves impossible: “Finally he touches the golden strings with the bow... The music immediately breaks off and falls silent, as if at a wave from someone. [...] The music, the interrupted impossibility of grasping the secretive and desired song, sounds again, extolling the first chord and lamenting the fall of the golden fiddle” (SO 182).

Like Mallarmé’s mime, Leśmian’s too – unable to manifest that which is inexpressible – is ultimately condemned to the imitation of imitation or mimesis, thereby exposing its illusory nature, its inability to grasp the “Mystery” identified with the music (SO 180), the transcendent meaning: “Without a fiddle, he plays on branches. He plays long, unconsciously, idly, listening to imaginary sounds – sounds that are not there, that do not exist...” (SO 194).

We might agree with Rochelle Stone’s thesis that the mimic dramas constitute the poetic absolute in Leśmian’s work,⁴⁴³ though it is worth adding that this absolute is simultaneously questioned and undermined at its very foundations. What is represented in *The Frenzied Fiddler* is the fiction of representability, since the movement and the mimic gesture that are meant to function as a synonym for authentic representation, or original mimesis, simultaneously unmask mimeticism itself.

The idea of the fake playing of an instrument from *The Frenzied Fiddler* can be interpreted as an allusion to a scene from Norwid’s drama, *Za kulisami* (*Behind the Scenes*), in which two characters – Harlequin and Pierrot (as in

443 See: Stone, Rochelle, Introduction to *Skrzypek opętany*, cited edition, p. 60.

Leśmian's second mimic drama) – use gestures to imitate playing the guitar.⁴⁴⁴ Yet the connections and relationships between *Behind the Scenes* and Leśmian's pantomimes are not limited to similarities of isolated thematic motifs. Norwid's work also tackles, albeit in a disguised way, the fundamental problems and paradoxes of the phenomenon of mimeticism.

The dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic representation is clearly outlined in the drama. Truth is identified with the whole: "Yet the power of Truth comes from where? – It comes from its Whole." True, "natural" representation – with a complete, simultaneous and, so to speak, cubist view of the entire object – is contrasted with the flat, deformed reflection in the mirror: "And there was never a reflection of a flat eye that, when looking at an autumnal apple tree with a rare or single fruit at its top, saw wholly and solely just this apple, and also only of that apple the side that is placed most comfortably towards the eye. Indeed! Looking at this object we do not by any means see the surface alone, but through a mysterious and masterful *general sense* we see almost all the other lumps and gashes of the object."⁴⁴⁵

The theme of the mirror appears in the work on two other occasions, apparently emphasizing the distortion of the reflected object and the impossibility of recognizing it:

Emma: Inspector Sofistoff... wanted to approach, but was stopped by some domino - -

Lia: Are you sure he didn't recognize me?...

Emma: You were facing the wall – though a reflective wall! ... he went...he went...let's talk...⁴⁴⁶

The unmasking of the mirror as metaphor for the representation of the true and veristic seems to be a central feature of the structure of the entire work. It may also serve as an internal, hidden model of its mimeticism. All the following elements expose the illusory nature of *Behind the Scenes* and point to the drama's departure from the realistic canons of faithful imitation: placing the action in the vestibule of the theater and in the "masquerade hall," the theme of theater in the theater, and the introduction of characters that openly violate the conventions of verisimilitude (personified flowers) or contravene them by referring to the conventions of *commedia dell'arte* (Masks, Dominos, Harlequin, Pierrot).

444 Norwid, Cyprian Kamil, *Za kulisami*, pp. 543, 544. Leśmian himself revealed these allusions directly, writing about this scene from Norwid's drama in his essay "Z rozmyślań o poezji," *Szkice literackie*, ed. and introduction Jacek Trznadel (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1959), p. 89.

445 The quotations come from pp. 532 and 530 respectively of the cited edition of Norwid's writings.

446 *Ibid.*, p. 520. The theme of the reflective wall also appears on p. 533.

Mimic art, the sphere of the gesture, and the closely connected ideas of silence and sculpture, fulfill a significant role in Norwid's work, to a certain degree anticipating Leśmian's and, in general, the modern understanding of the phenomenon of mime and its imitative functions.⁴⁴⁷ Gesture is above all a means of mediation between the transcendent and empirical planes, and secondly a favored way of representing something that is singular and momentary. "Art's / Whole secret: / A spirit – like a spark / In gesture caught," wrote Norwid in his poem "Lapidaria," which is also close in form to the mini-dialogue, or the mimic scene.⁴⁴⁸

This theme is developed in *Ad leones!*: "– As for me – I said – I am thinking that *taking hold of a cross with your hand* is of those hitherto known the most difficult choreographic and artistic task – THE FINGER TOUCHES THE SYMBOL –." It is not difficult to perceive that this sentence has two meanings: literal, referring to the physical gesture and contact with a sensory object, and metaphorical, referring to the metaphysical gesture and defining the means of contact with the sacred – contact that is not abstract, but concrete, individual. The difficulty here, or even paradox, concerns the attempt to mediate between diametrically different spheres: the empirical and the transcendent, the physical and the spiritual.

The motif of mimic gesture also constitutes an important component of the semantics of the entire work, which might be read as an examination of the incommensurability of literal, original, intentional meaning with the figurative, derivative meaning transmitted in the act of reception and constituting a "violation" of the original meaning. The significance of a sculptural group, which, in the author's conception, is meant to represent a group of Christians being persecuted at a specific historical moment, is first subjected to universalization: "yet it is not about personas, but about drama." Then it submits to allegorization: "The group represents CAPITALIZATION in a reasoned and accessible way."⁴⁴⁹ The precedence given to the gesture and symbol as "truth of

447 Wyka, Kazimierz, (*Cyprian Norwid, Poeta i sztukmistrz* [Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 1948], p. 37), pointing to the significant role of gesture in the poet's oeuvre, described certain works, including *Fatum*, as "pantomimes, silent playlets." The primacy of gesture over words in Norwid was also discussed by Irena Sławińska in the article "'Ciąg scenicznych gestów' w teatrze Norwida," *Sceniczny gest poety* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1948), pp. 57, 58.

448 Norwid, Cyprian Kamil, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 233. Translation from http://allpoetry.com/poem/8532847-Lapidaria-by-Cyprian_Kamil_Norwid (access: 6.11.12.)

449 Norwid, Cyprian Kamil, *Ad leones!*, cited edition; the quotations come from pages 140 and 142 respectively.

representation,”⁴⁵⁰ authentic mimesis, is therefore accompanied by the unmasking of allegories as false mimesis, condemned to arbitrariness and conventionality.

Creating Presence: Mime and the Phenomenon of Representation

It would therefore appear that the views cited here on the expressive, communicative, and – more generally – cognitive values of gesture and movement, allow us to formulate a thesis on the epistemic precedence of motive forms in modernist tradition. As I have attempted to show, this phenomenon is not limited solely to theatrical ideas, but also comprises a significant and enduring theme – sometimes expressed explicitly, and sometimes in a disguised fashion – of the poetic consciousness of modernism, which is also associated, in even broader terms, with the modern problematization of the phenomenon of representation. Gordon Craig’s remarks deserve to be recognized as characteristic of this approach, treating it as a kind of epiphany and, at the same time, connecting it with one of the central postulates of modernism – the expression of the inexpressible: “In the beginning with you it was Impersonation; you passed on to Representation and now you advance into Revelation. When impersonating and representing, you made use of those materials which had always been made use of; that is to say, the human figure as exemplified in the poet through the actor, the visible world as shown by means of Scene. You now will reveal by means of movement the invisible things, those seen through the eye and not with the eye, by the wonderful and divine power of movement.”⁴⁵¹

Sonnet 15 from the second cycle of Rainer Maria Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus* may be seen as a model illustration of the modernist approach to the epistemological values of movement. This poem depicts an apparently impossible situation: the dancing of an orange. Rilke seems to invoke here the significance of dance as original mimesis. Movement appears in the sonnet as a kind of epistemological universal that excludes both language – “Girls, you girls who are silent and warm, / dance the taste of the fruit you’ve been tasting” – and, notably, music – “Just a little music, a tapping, a hum.” The essence of this dancing-mimic cognition is reaching the essence of the object: “Glowing, strip / perfume from perfume. Become sisters / with the pure, resistant rind, / the juice

450 “Białe kwiaty,” cited edition, p. 195.

451 Gordon Craig, Edward, *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: Heinemann, 1911), p. 46.

that fills the happy fruit!"; "You've possessed it." The essence of the fruit has a fleeting character that is hard to capture: "Wait ... that tastes good ... it's already bolting." Yet significantly, the fruit itself, its nature, is not a passive object of contemplation, but rather an active element, co-creating the interaction: "Become sisters with the pure, resistant rind."⁴⁵²

Yet it seems that this cognition by movement conceals within itself both an antinomy and a paradox: an antinomy, since cognition of static being is reached by way of a dynamic act or praxis; a paradox, since the dancing of an object (especially in the way shown in the poem) appears to be an impossible action, at least in the common linguistic sense. Moreover, among the various semiotic paradigms of representation for such an object as fruit, the most appropriate and "natural" would seem rather to be painting (for instance, the still life). Therefore, the choice of a system of signs based on movement or gesture takes on a particular significance here – perhaps as a conscious effort to make the process of representation more dynamic.

However, it does seem that mimic representation is distinguished by particular features that allow it to be recognized as a phenomenon to a certain degree distinct in relation to other means of imitation by movement. We can distinguish at least two important elements: 1) doing away with the conventionality of representation and the closely related motif of unmediated presence; and 2) the momentary and discontinuous nature of mimic representation.

The most complete illustration of the first theme can be found in the writings of Étienne Decroux. His works essentially form a treatise devoted to mimic representation, constituting a characteristic document of self-reflection by one of the most eminent mimic artists of the twentieth century. Decroux contrasts linguistic representation, distinguished by its conventional character and use of traditional symbols, with the activity of the mime artist – unhampered by conventionality, based not on recreating, but on creating and enabling contact with a living presence: "Because 'to speak' means not just to express, suggest, remind, give cause for thought, but also to create a sign in which everyone sees the same meaning as a result of a certain prevailing tradition. Mime only creates presences, which are in no way conventional signs. And if it came to create such

452 Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. A. Poulin, Jr. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 113. In his essay "On the Essence of Truth," published slightly later than Rilke's poem, Martin Heidegger wrote about the activeness of being in the act of presentation: "This [the saying of beings] can occur only if beings present themselves along with the presentative statement so that the latter subordinates itself to the directive that it speak of beings *such-as* they are." See Heidegger, Martin, "On the Essence of Truth," *Basic Writings*, p. 122.

signs, this would be the beginning of its end. By becoming a variant of the verbal genre, it would cease to be a brother of drawing, sculpture, painting, music.”⁴⁵³ According to Decroux, realism is also merely a particular signifying practice, so that it too is situated in the domain of imitation based on convention. Realism is contrasted with reality as living presence, in which the signifying element and signified element are equated: “Mime [...] comprises an accumulation of devices which depart from realism, but on stage only the body remains: the first reality.”⁴⁵⁴

Jan August Kisielewski addressed similar ideas in his essay devoted to the mimic dances of Isadora Duncan. He most often emphasizes ecstatic, visionary qualities and the revelation of deep, unconscious aspects of spiritual life as the key characteristics of mimic expression. Mime also goes beyond the opposition of life and art, combining and synthesizing the natural and the conventional, and therefore constituting a means of expression and representation that takes precedence over both discursive language and poetic speech: “Mime is manifested by those states of the soul in which the distinction between art and life is lost, or rather in which they complement each other, forming a higher and perhaps perfect kind of beauty, as living artistry or artistic life. The beauty of nature and art, sensory beauty, emotional and even intellectual beauty – in those moments when color, tone, mass, the language of poetry and the proposition of the thinker prove to be insufficient means – this beauty of artistically stylized nature and art, pulsing with the blood of life, can be expressed only by means of mime.”⁴⁵⁵

453 Decroux, Etienne, *O sztuce mimu*, trans. Jerzy Litwiniuk (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1967), pp. 166-167.

454 Ibid., p. 176.

455 Kisielewski, Jan August, “O sztuce mimicznej. Konferencya,” *Pannusaion. Życie dramatu. Mile słówka. Życie w powieści. Słowa Monelli. Pannusaion. O sztuce mimicznej* (Lwów: 1906), pp. 186-187. Also see remarks on mimic dance as of a “sensual, essential, real nature,” *ibid.*, p. 183, as well as Jerzy Żuławski’s observations on the differences between the semiotics of acting and the semiotics of literature. The former is characterized by dynamism, momentariness and a non-symbolic character: “The actor uses movement to create life: through it he becomes the body of that which was the word. These two things: the means used (movement) and the goal that is striven for (creation of life) ensure that acting occupies an entirely different position from other arts. Above all, the actor must be present in his art, give himself up to it, as it were, entirely, since he cannot separate the movement from himself and crystallize it in some sign, as is done for example by a poet writing the words of his poetry instead of speaking them. Secondly, because it is living, his art does not leave lasting works; instead, it is transitory, changing and temporary, like life itself.” Cf. Żuławski, Jerzy, “O sztuce aktorskiej,” *Miasta umarłe* (Warszawa: S. Orgelbrand, 1918).

The mode of signification characteristic of mime understood in this way seems to be closest to indexicality or ostension, since the sign is based here not so much on convention (sign), or even on real similarity (icon), but rather on a real, existential connection with the object.⁴⁵⁶ The opposition between conventionality (language, literature) and unconventionality (mime, dance, acting) of representation seems to be evidence not only of the modernist crisis of language and its characteristic means of representation,⁴⁵⁷ but also of a broader phenomenon which, in a different context, Roland Barthes called the disintegration of the sign, which characterizes modernity and involves efforts to “make the descriptive notation a pure encounter between the object and its expression.”⁴⁵⁸

An illustration of the latter theme might be Søren Kierkegaard’s brief remarks from *The Concept of Anxiety*, which directly refer to the ballet *Faust* and to ways of representing demonic nature, but indirectly concern the problem of representation and representability as a whole. Mimic expression is characterized by a momentary and discontinuous nature. Therefore, it is associated with Kierkegaard’s central category of “the leap,” while also being juxtaposed with a linear or continuous model of linguistic expression: “The most terrible words that sound from the abyss of evil would not be able to produce an effect like that of the suddenness of the leap that lies within the confines of the mimical”; “The word and speech, no matter how short when regarded *in abstracto*, always have a certain continuity for the reason that they are heard in time. But what is sudden entirely abstracts itself from continuity or

456 As a particular example of “ostension,” Roman Jakobson gives theatrical art with people as *signantia* (actors) and people as *signata* (characters). See his essay “Language in Relation to Other Communication Systems,” in *Selected Writings*, Volume 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 570–579.

457 On the modernist crisis of language, see Ryszard Nycz, “Język modernizmu. Doświadczenie wyobcowania i jego konsekwencje,” *Język modernizmu. Prolegomena historycznoliterackie* (Wrocław, 1997). Michel Levinson writes – in *The Fate of Individuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 72 – about the crisis of confidence in language and its replacement by gesture, or the act of ostension – not describing the world but “pointing” to it – in the context of Henry James’s novels. Bernard Pautrat (*Versions du soleil. Figures et système de Nietzsche* [Paris: Seuil, 1971], pp. 55–58) interprets in a fairly similar way the relationship of conceptual language with gesture and mime in the writings of Nietzsche. See also Michał Sobeski’s comments on “Nietzsche’s painted and sculpted words” in *Przędziwo Arachny. Z pogranicza sztuki i filozofii* (Kraków: Gebethner, 1910), p. 152.

458 Barthes, Roland: “The reality effect,” *Literary Theory Today*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (New York and Paris: Cambridge University Press & Editions de la maison des sciences de l’homme, 1982).

consecutiveness.”⁴⁵⁹ The significance of the mime therefore entails the fact that it allows the momentary, unique, and transitory to be captured and preserved. At the same time, the “fleeting mimical expression”⁴⁶⁰ triggers an effect of equivalence between the moment and eternity, since the present is stopped, immobilized, detached from time, from becoming, and from linearity. This concept assumes the seemingly unquestionable understanding of temporality not as a continual process but as a set, or rather series, of atomized, “discrete” moments, and therefore, in effect, a spatialization of time.⁴⁶¹

Kierkegaard’s musings on eternity and temporality seem to articulate, for the first time and in such a clear manner, one of the fundamental dilemmas of modern consciousness: “The new value which is now accorded to the ephemeral, the momentary and the transitory, and the concomitant celebration of dynamism, expresses precisely the yearning for a lasting and immaculate present. As a self-negating movement, modernism is a ‘yearning for true presence.’”⁴⁶²

Paul Valéry poses a very similar problem on the aesthetic level in his short essay “Mime.” He characterizes Degas’s artistic observation of reality as a mimic manner of seeing, which entails the ability to capture in the object not that which is stable and lasting, but the opposite – “poses that are in their structure temporary,” i.e. that which is momentary and fleeting, which falls outside earlier categories for observing reality, and beyond the means used in painting before Degas: “Passionate desire for the one line that determines the character, but a character taken from the street, seen on the street, at the Opera, at the hat maker or even in other places; a character captured in what is most characteristic, at a given moment, always active, expressive – this for me is Degas. He endeavored and dared to join together that which is transitory, with ceaseless work. Close impressions in a thorough study, a moment in the lasting of the thinking will.”⁴⁶³ This mimic way of observing reality seems to define

459 Kierkegaard, Søren, *Pojęcie lęku. Psychologicznie orientujące proste rozważanie....*, trans. Alina Dżakowska (Warszawa: Aletheia, 1996), pp. 156, 157.

460 Ibid., Kierkegaard’s footnote, pp. 106; 97-112.

461 We should add, however, that Kierkegaard criticizes spatialization of time. Cf. Taylor, Mark C., *Kierkegaard’s Pseudonymous Authorship: A Study of Time and the Self* (Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 81-86. Mime, like musicality, belongs to the sphere of aesthetic experience, contrasted, of course, with ethics. The suddenness and demonic nature manifested in mime are seen as an expression of fear of the good, identified with continuity, cf. Kierkegaard, pp. 156, 157.

462 Habermas, Jürgen, “Modernity: an Unfinished Project”, *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, eds. Passerin d’Entrèves, Maurizio and Benhabib, Seyla (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), p. 40.

463 See Valéry, Paul, *Degas, Dance, Drawing*, trans. Helen Burlin (New York: Lear, 1948).

fairly clearly the nature of the problem of representation in modern art: discerning the significant characteristics of the object in that which is individual, unique, connected with the present, along with the endeavor to represent momentariness and manifest that which is mutable and dynamic. It also seems that Valéry's outlook was influenced to a significant extent by the concept of art most fully expressed by Baudelaire in *The Painter of Modern Life*: "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable."⁴⁶⁴

Therefore, it seems to be the case that the apparently marginal issue of mimic art is connected to the ontological and aesthetic questions fundamental to modernism. Moreover, it constitutes a field, or a kind of mental figure, thanks to which these questions can be articulated and developed. Mime and mimic art also fulfill the role of favored metaphor for original mimesis, conceived as revelation, presentation, but not re-presentation. The ideas of unconventionality and momentariness that characterize the type of imitation of reality typical of mime essentially express the conviction that art – or at least a certain favored, and therefore somehow typical, field of art – is capable of eradicating, or at least reducing to a minimum, the distance between the object of representation understood in the broadest terms and the means and modes of representation. As a result, it is able to reach authentic presence, which is completely unmediated, pure, free from the action of the destructive power of time or language.

As I have attempted to show, in the Polish tradition one should seek the beginnings of this understanding of mime and mimic art in Norwid. Its fullest and most artistically accomplished development is attained in Leśmian's *Mimic Dramas*. This theme also appears, with certain modifications, in avant-garde conceptions, as demonstrated by the remarks of Tadeusz Peiper, who directly compares the fragmentary, discontinuous construction of ballet scenes with the technique of the avant-garde poem: "The ambiguity that 'Dantean Scenes' had for me came to a great extent from its construction: giving just fragments of a story, only loose scenes, and eliminating that which continuity gives to a story. In this fragmentariness and looseness, in ignoring continuity, there is something of the ellipsis used by certain works of avant-garde poetry."⁴⁶⁵

In modern aesthetics, mime is understood as a single, momentary, discontinuous mimetic gesture, and therefore rather in spatial than in temporal

464 Baudelaire, Charles, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), p. 12. He points to the fact that Baudelaire and Valéry construct a semantics of momentariness, the present, and transience using similar elements, such as dress, fashion, gesture, momentary facial expression etc.

465 Peiper, Tadeusz, "O tańcach artystycznych," *Twórczość* 1 (1948), p. 61.

categories. Mimic art and the particular meanings and functions attributed to it can therefore be located, one might suspect, within the broader question of spatial form in modern literature, which has been analyzed on numerous occasions.⁴⁶⁶

This spatiality is realized on several levels. On the generic level one might mention the popular modernist genre of the portrait, developed most fully by Walter Pater, and in the Polish tradition by Miciński; on the poetical level, there is imagist poetics; and on the level of constructive devices there are simultaneism and juxtaposition. The common feature of all these tendencies is the striving for an eradication, or at least significant weakening, of the temporality, linearity, and continuity of literary form in favor of spatiality, discontinuity, momentariness – *nunc fluens* into *nunc stans*.

In Polish literary criticism, these tendencies are emphatically expressed by Ostap Ortwin, who wrote in “*Żywe fikcje*” (“Living Fictions”) in 1908: “Therefore, just like in sculpture and painting, in verbal art too the *moment* is a crucial, fundamental element of artistic output. The whole content of life, its flesh, lies here, in the individual moments of being, while the artistic commemoration of the irretrievable individuality of this moment in momentary material is of decisive and crucial significance for the essence of art.”⁴⁶⁷ We

466 On this subject, see especially Joseph Frank’s classic article, still cited in the subject literature, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” *The Sewanee Review* 2-3 (1945). See also William Spanos’s essay “Heidegger, Kierkegaard, and the Hermeneutic Circle: Towards a Postmodern Theory of Interpretation as Dis-closure,” in *Martin Heidegger and the Question of Literature. Toward Postmodern Literary Hermeneutics*, ed. idem (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), in which the author contrasts the “existential/temporal hermeneutics” of Heidegger and the “metaphysical/spatial interpretive methodology of Modernist criticism” (p. 120). Gianni Vattimo (*The End of Modernity*, op. cit. p. 72), however, shows convincingly that the spatial dimension – especially in Heidegger’s late texts, which Spanos does not consider – plays an important role in the German philosopher’s understanding of art. In terms of other works devoted to the problem of spatiality in modern literature, cf. Mitchell, W.J.T., “Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory,” *Critical Inquiry*, 6.3 (Spring 1980); Steiner, Wendy, *The Colors of Rhetoric. Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

469 Ortwin, Ostap, “*Żywe fikcje*,” *Pisma krytyczne Ostapa Ortwina*, ed. Jadwiga Czachowska (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1970), p. 49. Similar themes can also be found in other studies by Ortwin, e.g. the essay “Psychologizującemu estetykowi w odpowiedzi, a propos Mickiewiczowskiej Rozmowy”, where he writes: “In terms of psychological content we are dealing with a simple, uniform moment of personal experience, a fleeting, passing act of the soul, with its blinking and flashing, rather than with a chain of occurrences taking place one after another.” Op. cit. p. 125. See also Ortwin’s essay “O gazdostwie ‘Księgi ubogich’”, where he writes: “The moment drags on

may assume that this characteristic observation does not just refer to the thematic, or even structural, relationships between literature and the fine arts, but also points to a fundamental significance for the entire modern concept of the literary sign and the way in which it refers to reality. In other words, it points to the perception of the literary sign as spatial sign – or at least as something essentially close to the spatial sign, or modeled on it. This thesis seems to be confirmed by the semiotic research of Michel Foucault, particularly in his analysis of the difference between the understanding of the linguistic sign characteristic of the classical episteme (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and the understanding of the linguistic sign characteristic of the nineteenth-century episteme. Foucault noticed that the former interpreted the linguistic sign spatially, as a model determining a portrait or map, while the latter tore the linguistic sign away from the visual sign and – by bringing it closer to the musical note – treated it as a sound. According to the author of *The Order of Things*, a rebirth of the spatial-visual conception of the literary sign takes place in Saussure's analyses – that is, on the cusp of modernity.⁴⁶⁸

From this perspective, we should then acknowledge the spatial model, with its numerous variations, as characteristic of modern literature. Meanwhile, the musical model, so widespread in the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, would essentially constitute the legacy of nineteenth-century conceptions of literature, based on a temporal understanding of the literary sign. The exchange of these models would therefore make it possible to distinguish modern literature from, for example, the neo-Romantic and impressionist currents of “Young Poland.” We can identify some of the first and most emphatic examples of the expansion of spatial-visual metaphors at the expense of temporal-aural metaphors in the writings – especially the later writings – of Stanisław Brzozowski, in which musicality and “melodiousness” – referring both to the features of Polish intellectual life and those of literary form – are judged decidedly negatively. They serve as synonyms for lack of intellectual precision, disregard for the coherence of the views expressed, lack of depth and connection to the important questions of modern life, and – in the case of literature – structural inadequacies: “In Poland the number of singing minds is increasing to a remarkable degree, as proven by the terrifying supply of rhythmic prose on the literary market.”⁴⁶⁹ The different variants of spatial-visual

like eternity. In the bliss of the vacation, in the idleness of life, in the sweet *dolce far niente*, it is grabbed by the wings and told to last for infinity.” Op. cit. p. 133.

468 See Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things*, trans. anon. (New York: Pantheon, 1970).

469 Brzozowski, Stanisław, “Listy o literaturze III. ‘Gromnice’; p. Marii Zabojeckiej,” *Współczesna powieść i krytyka u nas*, vol. II of *Dziela*, ed. M. Sroki (Kraków, Wrocław, 1984), p. 440.

metaphors are always applied by Brzozowski with the objective of emphasizing a certain structuralization, logical shaping and coherence of philosophical views and literary construction. A short article on Gustaw Daniłowski is particularly rich in sculptural and architectural metaphors: “Daniłowski is an artist of the eye and hand. Phenomena must stand almost carved out before him, as transparent as thought, as resolute as marble”; “Pociąg” [“Train”], “Nad przepaścią” [“Over the Abyss”] – these are sculptural *groups*, in which thought has hewn out whole sets of social phenomena”; “The objective towards which Daniłowski’s art always leads is the picture clearly and artistically expressing a multitude of phenomena – the powerful, and logical summary of manifold reality.”⁴⁷⁰

These themes were continued in the theoretical consciousness of the Avant-Garde, which emphasized the visual aspect – and therefore the aspect characteristic of the fine arts – in the perception of a literary work. In 1923, defending the application of the principles of punctuation in poetry, Tadeusz Peiper writes: “Another argument for it is the fact that today poetry is consumed above all by reading, and not listening; this is why the external aspect of the work should be conditioned by the needs of the eye, and not the ear.”⁴⁷¹ A very

470 Brzozowski, “Gustaw Daniłowski,” *Dziela*, p. 455. Sculptural and architectural metaphors are widespread in Brzozowski’s writings. For instance, see his characteristic observations about sculpture as an art expressing the fundamental issues of modern life and defining – metaphorically – the cognitive range of modern thought by underlining its pragmatist, constructivist character: “Everything that might appear on the horizon of our thought, as long as it is something important to us, is artistic. Whatever cannot be expressed in any form of our human art is not real. A great wisdom is contained within sculpture: that the human being can take true account only of what he is able to endow with the form of his own life.” Cf. Brzozowski, Stanisław, *Idee. Wstęp do filozofii dojrzałości dziejowej* (Lwów, 1910), p. 428. See also scattered observations on Norwid’s and Staff’s poetry from *Legenda Młodej Polski*, 2nd ed. (Lwów: Księgarnia Polska Bernarda Połonieckiego, 1910), pp. 445, 446, 453. Other, traditional spatial metaphors used by Brzozowski include the metaphor of windows as a way of categorizing reality for the cognizing subject (*Idee*, cit. ed., p. 18). Brzozowski’s critique of the “musicality” of “Young Poland” is discussed by Kazimierz Wyka in “Stanisława Brzozowskiego dyskusja o Fryderyku Nietzschem,” *Młoda Polska. Szkice z problematyki epoki*, vol. II, p. 229: “In a word, the Young Poland that Brzozowski brought to trial in the name of true responsibility was musical. The prosecutor, in the few statements we are given, was of a decidedly sculptural nature. In sculpture, he saw the aesthetic fulfillment and highest expression of his attitude towards the world, as the artists of Young Poland saw it in music.”

471 Peiper, Tadeusz, “Futuryzm,” *Tędy. Nowe usta* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1972), p. 159. See the characteristic observations from *Nowe usta* (op. cit., p. 342), in which the visual manner of perceiving the poem is considered the equivalent of its construction, based on the requirements of functionality and a high degree of structuring: “Functional dependence should merge the sentences of a poem into a perceptible unity.

similar approach is taken by Józef Wittlin in the titular essay of the volume *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* (*Orpheus in the Hell of the Twentieth Century*, 1930-1942): “Lyric poets without their lyres now compose their poems not for the ear, but for the eye. The aural forms of the poem are not developing. They are rarely refreshed by new inventions or by returns to old techniques, such as assonances.”⁴⁷² Avant-garde poetry’s departure from the musical model, and its increasing affinity with the model of the fine arts, were also identified by critics and literary historians. In his notes from the early 1930s, Henryk Elzenberg writes: “The times are today clearly more for art than for music. As a result, art – and painting in particular – as well as poems, if compared with the Young Poland period, have benefited [...] However, the musicality of poetry is at an utterly low ebb; the bottom of the dried-out stream can be seen.”⁴⁷³ Kazimierz Wyka, discussing the relations between literature and the arts, also points out that Romantic and Young Polish literature were particularly close to music, whereas avant-garde literature demonstrates closer similarities with the fine arts, in particular architecture.⁴⁷⁴

On the other hand, Leśmian’s work might serve as an example of the clash of the temporal model with the spatial one. Although there is clearly a dominant musical theme in his writings – “a song without words” – he also takes up old visual metaphors, such as Alberti’s metaphor of the “open window” (*finestra aperta*), and “semiotizes them, so to speak, thus undermining their character as direct, unmediated representation: “I do not sing, but with my words alone look out of the window at the world, though I know not who opens the window.”⁴⁷⁵

The plan of the poem’s layout should be visible, like the plan of a railway station or department store. Because a *poem is a construction*.” See also his critique of “those old addicts of musicality” (op. cit. p. 351).

472 Wittlin, Józef, *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* (Paryż: Instytut Literacki, 1963), p. 383.

473 Elzenberg, Henryk, *Kłopot z istnieniem. Aforyzmy w porządku czasu* (*Pisma* vol. II) (Kraków, 1994), p. 218. Typically, as late as 1908 (cf. op. cit. pp. 29-30) Elzenberg thought that musicality – giving a poem a rhythmic and hieratic character and reducing the freedom and “naturalness” – cleanses poetry of the non-poetic and distances it from colloquial utterance.

474 Wyka, Kazimierz, *Cyprian Norwid. Poeta i sztukmistrz*, cited edition, pp. 58-59.

475 Leśmian, Bolesław, “Zamyślenie,” *Poezje*, (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1965), p. 248. See also Julian Przyboś’s characteristic observation (*Linia i gwar* [Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1959], pp. 93-94) that, in Leśmian’s works, “each word is seen like a convex sculpture.”

The Metaphor of the Ornament in Philosophical Discourse: From Kant to Vattimo

The employment of the idea of the ornament in the context of philosophical discourse may seem like a strange operation. The ornament does not belong to the language of philosophy – or at least not to its basic lexicon, which consists above all of grand, classical ideas such as being, substance, subject, idea, etc. It is clearly a term from the repertoire of art history, forming a part of this discipline's conceptual apparatus and enjoying a long and rich tradition within it. In accordance with its etymology – the Latin verb “*ornare*” means “to decorate” – the ornament is above all associated with decorativeness and the decorative arts. Ornamental or decorative art, which tends towards abstraction and non-figurativeness, is often juxtaposed with figurative, representational or mimetic art. Other ideas closely associated with the idea of the ornament include the grotesque, arabesque and the meander.

Of course there is neither space nor necessity here to trace – even in the broadest outline – the history of the ornament and the various ways in which it has been understood in reflections on art or in aesthetic thought. Surplus, an excess of decorativeness, lavishness in certain painterly works and craftwares receive the critical attention of Pliny the Younger in his *Natural History*. Vitruvius's attitude toward decorativeness and ornamental art is somewhat more complex. Although he condemns the so-called fourth Pompeian style partly for its decorative effects, he also notes in these effects a certain grace (*charis*). Isidore of Seville uses a similar category – *venustas* – in his description of decorative art, treating the ornament and decorative art in general as something secondary, superfluous and supplementary to the proper form or structure of a work of art: “*quidquid ornamenti et decoris causa aedificiis additur, ut tectorum aureo distincta aequaria, et pretiosi marmoris crustae, et colorum picturae.*”⁴⁷⁶ Macrobius also mentions ornamentation in his writings.⁴⁷⁷

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought richer and more developed reflections on the subject of the ornament and decorativeness. We might mention here such works as Ralph Wornum's *The Analysis of Ornament* (1856), Louis Sullivan's *Ornament in Architecture* (1892), Alois Riegl's *Die spatromische kunstindustrie* (1901), Adolf Loos's well-known *Ornament and Crime* (*Ornament und Verbrechen*, 1908), as well as Ernst Gombrich's books, *Art and Illusion* (1960) and *The Sense of Order* (1979). Decorative and ornamental art has largely been treated as secondary, minor or marginal in

476 *Enciclopedia universale dell'arte* (Venezia-Roma: 1963), pp. 238-239.

477 Macrobius, *Opera* (Lipsiae: 1893), p. 191.

relation to the canon of representative or figurative classical art. The ornament itself has often been considered as an eccentric or non-functional element, dispensable from the perspective of the internal ordering of the work of art. Indeed, it has sometimes been regarded as a violation of the precise rules of artistic construction. The sharpest and most comprehensive critique of decorativeness and the ornament was formulated by Loos, whose attack formed the basis for a whole range of critical positions in which the ornament was judged negatively. From the perspective of the prevailing cultural hierarchies, the ornament was a relict of barbarism and a testimony to a civilization's low level. From the perspective of the structure of a work, it was a superfluous, disfunctional element, distracting attention from what was proper in the work – that is, its construction and form. From the ethical perspective, it was a lie, a mere appearance masking the true character of a work. From the economic perspective, it represented an extravagance increasing the cost of the object.

For the sake of balance, we should mention the dissenting, positive opinions of certain other art theoreticians, including Henri Focillon, who considered the ornament to be the original alphabet of human thought for ordering space, almost identical with the idea of artistic form in general. After all, the ornament – characterized by symmetry, doubling, alternation, enveloping – creates a peculiar border. It exists autonomously, purely for itself, while also giving form to that which it surrounds.

In the history of art, periods that have brought particular development in decorative art and the ornament have included, among others, late antiquity, the late medieval period, and to some extent the Romantic period. However, ornamentality and decorativeness took on particular significance in the Rococo and Secession periods, in which they were important forms of artistic expression.⁴⁷⁸ Ornamentation – especially using organic motifs – was clearly one of the favored artistic motifs of the Secession period. However, this motif also gave expression to a particularly interesting perceptual and cognitive problem: the relation of the internal and the external in a picture, or pictorial representation. The Secession movement – or at least certain currents within it – did not merely have a predilection for using refined ornamentation, but they also used devices based on the interchangeability of the main motif and the background on which the motif appeared, the negative and positive forms, the ornament and the area decorated or surrounded by it.⁴⁷⁹

478 See: Wallis, Mieczysław, *Secesja* (Warszawa: Arkady, 1984).

479 *Ibid.*, p. 220.

This is precisely the problem that will interest me here: the various relations of the internal and the external as expressed in artistic and especially literary experience – and as conceptualized in the language of philosophy. I shall treat the ornament as a figure of thought common to various discourses, pointing to those often paradoxical areas – impossible to describe in conceptual language – where we find the tangles, shifts, crossings, intersections, interpenetrations and interchanges of the internal and the external, the central and the marginal or peripheral, the structured and the unstructured, the immediate and the mediated, the profound and the superficial, the transcendent and the immanent, the essential and the non-essential, the signifier and the signified, and especially the representable and the unrepresentable.

Attempts to question and reverse these metaphysical binary oppositions – on which modern philosophical discourse in particular is based – are typical of the strategy of deconstruction. Viewed from this perspective, the metaphor of the ornament might be placed within the broadly understood semantics of the margin, marginality or the border, placed there as the impossibility of drawing permanent, absolute, inviolable borders, as a condition of being “between,” being displaced, being located neither here nor there – in other words, everything that, being indefinable or difficult to define, undermines attempts to establish permanent orders and hierarchies by revealing the places of their fluid interpenetration. Therefore, the metaphor of the ornament would be close to such ideas as the “chiasm,” the “intertwining” and the “fold,” which Maurice Merleau-Ponty employs to describe the interweaving of the visible and the invisible, the ideal and the material, the spiritual and the physical, my own and the other, “a common nervure of the signifying and the signified, adherence in and reversability of one another,” folds, the places where visible things become part of our bodily tissue and our body becomes a visible thing.⁴⁸⁰ It would also be close to such ideas as the margin, the “tympan,” and the supplement – with which Derrida describes and simultaneously undermines oppositions of the natural and the artificial, philosophy and literature, literal and figurative language, etc.⁴⁸¹

However, it seems that consciousness of this displacement and reversal of an order of the external and internal based on the primacy of the internal on various planes – including reflections on the human being and the forms of his self-knowledge and experience of himself and the world, reflections on language and

480 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Visible and Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 118.

481 See Derrida, Jacques, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

representability – had already made itself felt in various ways in modern art and literature. For example, we might look at Robert Musil’s *Man Without Qualities*, where the main character speaks of the creative energy of the external surface, dethroning the brain and the soul, which are exiled to the peripheries, and of the reconstruction of the human being by life, which occurs from the outside to the inside, of a transformation of the mode of life shaped as much by the “representatives” of depth – poets, painters, philosophers – as by tailors, fashion and chance.⁴⁸²

I shall limit my remarks about the metaphor of the ornament and its applications in the language of philosophy to three examples. One of these comes from the beginning of modernity, from one of its foundational texts, particularly in the aesthetic realm – Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. The second is drawn from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, a work demonstrating the critical moment in modern aesthetics. The third is taken from the writings of Vattimo, who looks – as we have seen – at aesthetic, philosophical and cultural modernity from the perspective of their decline.

Kant’s reflections on the ornament appear in two places in Book I of the *Critique of Judgment*, entitled “Analytic of the Beautiful.” In the first passage, Kant treats the ornament as “beautifying decoration,” as something added to the work proper, originating from outside and not belonging internally to the image of the object as a constitutive part. Moreover, such a decoration essentially has a destructive character, spoiling and damaging true beauty. It is characterized by mere charm and not by beauty in the proper sense. Therefore, it is excluded from the proper order of the pure judgment of taste, for which charm – according to Kant – cannot constitute a determining factor. Here Kant gives the examples of picture framing, the robes on statues and columns around a building, defining them as *parerga*, or additions.⁴⁸³ These are elements located on the border, the margin, the edge between the work proper, the internal, its essence and what surrounds the work, the background, external space.

482 See Musil, Robert, *A Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (New York: Vintage, 1996). Clifford Geertz is close to Musil’s artistic intuitions when he writes that, in modern anthropology, culture is treated not as a peripheral or ornamental element external to an immutable human nature, but rather as an element constitutive of that nature. Cf. Geertz, Clifford, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 44. Wolfgang Iser writes about the central role of the aesthetic experience of modernism in shaping the fundamental themes for postmodern philosophy in his essay, “The Birth of Postmodern Philosophy from the Spirit of Modern Art,” *History of European Ideas*, 14.3 (1992).

483 Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), p. 72.

Therefore, the ornament as *parergon* finds itself in a paradoxical situation, which is difficult to define. It exists on the border, at the join between the internal and the external, but it is difficult to determine to which of these categories it belongs, or on which side it is situated. Moreover, although the ornament is not a part of the work itself – not belonging to its essence – in a certain sense it makes it possible for the work to come into being and constitute itself. For the ornament forms the frame of the work, delimiting it, making it possible for us to see or define it precisely thanks to this cutting off, or separating of, that which is external to it. The ornament itself does not belong to the order of representation, but it makes representation possible. It does not have its own place or essence, but it makes it possible for us to ascribe an “internal” essence to the work and to locate it in a specific space. On the other hand, in the very gesture of framing the work, it precisely undermines and problematizes any strongly and distinctly defined borders, displacing them, making it impossible to give an unambiguous answer to the question of where the work ends and where the background – or that which is external to it – begins.⁴⁸⁴

This paradoxical, interdeterminate nature of the ornament as *parergon*, destabilizes the borders of the work of art, undermines the opposition of internal and external, and exposes the construction of the judgment of taste to serious problems with its proper object: “Aesthetic judgment must properly bear upon intrinsic beauty, not on finery and surrounds. Hence one must know – this is a fundamental presupposition, presupposing what is fundamental – how to determine the intrinsic – what is framed – and know what one is excluding as frame and outside-the-frame.”⁴⁸⁵ The “mobile” character of the ornament as object also affects the ornament as it appears in the *Critique of Judgment*, given that – several pages later – Kant differentiates “accessory beauty” (*pulchritudo adhaerans*) from “free beauty” (*pulchritudo vaga*), which is not linked with any concept or image of purpose (*vagor* means to wander, to stray from the subject; *vagus* means free, but also wavering or impermanent). As an example, Kant cites “elaborations,” decorative elements or unsemantic elements: “Thus designs *à la grecque*, the foliage on borders or on wallpaper, etc., mean nothing on their

484 “The frame labors [*travaille*] indeed. [...] Like wood. It creaks and cracks, breaks down and dislocates even as it cooperates in the production of the product, overflows it and is deduc(t)ed from it.” Derrida, Jacques, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 75. See also Simmel, Georg, “The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study,” *Theory Culture and Society* 11 (1994); “The Handle: An Aesthetic Study,” *Georg Simmel, 1858-1918: A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography*, ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959)

485 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

own: they represent [*vorstellen*] nothing, no object under a determinate concept, and are free beauties.” Then Kant immediately adds: “When we judge free beauty (according to mere form) then our judgment of taste is pure.”⁴⁸⁶

Therefore, Kant’s remarks on the ornament would seem to be characterized by a certain rupture based on a subtle conceptual shift. On the one hand, the decoration, the ornament, decorative elements – as additional, supplementary elements constituting a kind of surplus and “contaminated” with mere charm – are excluded from the domain of authentic beauty and aesthetic experience proper, or the judgment of taste. On the other hand, they represent precisely the “free beauty,” or beauty for itself, in which the judgment of taste takes on its purest form. As object, the ornament both circumscribes and shifts the borders of the work of art. As intellectual figure, it both circumscribes and shifts the borders of the discourse of the *Critique*, drawing and blurring the borders of its object – the “pure” beauty of the internal and the external.

Much like in Kant’s work, the ornament appears in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* both as a concept describing a certain phenomenon from art history and as a metaphor, a figure of thought referring to the ambiguous condition of “pure” art. Adorno undermines the Kantian dogma of art’s autotelicity and the unsemantic character expressed by the phrase “purposiveness without purpose.” He strikes at Kant’s most sensitive spot, so to speak – that is, precisely at those examples of art which would appear to be uncontaminated by representability and materiality: decorative and ornamental elements. The internal teleology of a work of art – according to Adorno – has a conventional, historically mutable nature. It is based on the transposition or reversal of the signifying and the signified, the referential and self-referential functions. After all, elements generally regarded as purposeless – such as ornaments, for instance – were once signifiers referring to an external reality beyond the work.⁴⁸⁷

The ornament may be regarded rather as a general metaphor for all of modern art and its aporetic nature. By attempting to define its uncontaminated essence through the exclusion of that which is other or external to it – materiality, empirical nature, moments of reference to social reality – it actually destroys its own foundations and loses any chance of defining its own identity. According to Adorno: “Beauty, powerless to define itself and only able to gain its definition by way of its other, a sort of aerial root, becomes entangled in the fate of artificial ornamentation.”⁴⁸⁸

486 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, pp. 76-77.

487 Adorno, Theodor, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 139.

488 *Ibid.*, p. 237.

Vattimo's reflections on the problem of the ornament – contained in "Ornament Monument" from *The End of Modernity* – find their beginning in the area of aesthetic experience. However, for Vattimo the point of departure is not Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, but Heidegger's essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" and his lesser known sketch, "Die Kunst und der Raum" ("Art and Space"), as well as the works of such contemporary art theoreticians as Ernst Gombrich, Mikel Dufrenne and Régis Michaud. Vattimo interprets these thinkers' characteristic shift of modern art's point of gravity from what is central in the work to the margins – their reversal of the center-periphery relation – in the context of Heidegger's understanding of truth in the work of art. In particular, this means interpreting this shift in the context of two ideas appearing in "The Origin of the Work of Art," namely "world" and "earth" – that which is "set up" and that which is "set forth." In the briefest terms, world is the opening, that which is manifested or revealed, while earth is closure, that which is not manifested and remains in shadow. Truth as "clearing" in the work of art does not have a metaphysical character. It is not based on the building of a lasting order of representation as correspondence, an adequation of the object and its representation, which gives cognitive certainty. Instead, it takes place in the strife between world and earth. Heidegger describes this strife through the concept of the "rift" (*Riss*) and various derivative words in German that translate into English as, among other things, "design," "outline," "features." However, the "rift" is not a rupture, a strong border dividing the internal and external elements of the work – its formal or structural side and the surroundings or reality to which it refers. On the contrary, the "rift" is rather a bond, a place of the mutual contact and belonging of opposites. Therefore, it is also the place where truth occurs: "This composed rift is the fugue of truth's shining."⁴⁸⁹

The Heideggerian concept of the rift also seems to bear some affinity with the concept of the ornament understood as point of intersection of the internal and the external. Vattimo uses the term "ornament" precisely in the context of the strife between world and earth, which he treats as the difference between the immediate, directly-given meaning of the work and secondary meanings remaining in reserve, so to speak, as an opposition of the work itself and its surroundings or background. Firstly, this allows for a positive valuation of ornamental, decorative art and emphasizes its essential role in contemporary culture. Secondly, and more importantly, the concept of the ornament ends up functioning as a metaphor depicting precisely the concrete, manifestational or alethic character of truth as given in the work of art in opposition to the metaphysical or correspondence theory of truth.

489 Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Basic Writings*, p. 189.

Vattimo considers this characteristic experience of truth in the work of art – typified by the shift of the point of gravity towards that which is marginal, peripheral, ornamental, or on the border between various orders – as characteristic of the entire, late-modern, “weak” experience of being and reality. In “Dio ornamento” – from Vattimo’s most recent book, *Dopo la cristianità*⁴⁹⁰ – he characterizes this “weakening” as the shift in the experience of reality from that which is immutable, permanent, substantial or essential towards that which is marginal, peripheral, ornamental, virtual or phantasmagorical. Here, aesthetics preserves its original character as a sphere of sensual experience in which “strong” reality “dissolves,” loses its clear contours, while the real and the imaginary freely intermingle.

The figure of the ornament in modern aesthetic discourse – whose boundaries are marked on one side by Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* and on the other by Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art – functions like a shifting border that reveals the contradictions in which this discourse has become entangled in its desire to “strongly” divide “pure” art and the “pure” judgment of taste from that which is external to them. In fact, it is quite possible – when we recall the central role of aesthetic discourse in modernism – that this rupture might refer to the whole of modernity and its philosophical project. From this perspective, modernity would appear as a movement that simultaneously establishes borders – between the internal and the external, the same and the other – and inevitably shifts them.

In Polish modern literature, the theme of the ornament may be found in various works, including those of Stanisław Przybyszewski (*Z cyklu wigilii; De profundis*) and Roman Jaworski (“Zepsuty ornament” from *Historie manjaków*), as well as in the prose of Bruno Schulz and Bolesław Miciński from the 1930s, where this theme highlights the crisis of representation and the suspension of the text between contradictory semantic orders.⁴⁹¹ In Przybyszewski’s works, such motifs as the flower, the shell, the line and the wave point to the loss, by both the “I” and the world, of stability and substantiality, to the disappearance of clear borders between things – which are reduced to a conglomerate of momentary, dispersed and mutable impressions – as well as between the subject and the reality surrounding it: “He looked, read, his eyes widened until he felt a terrible pain, then suddenly the letters began to move, to break away from the

490 See Vattimo, Gianni, *Dopo cristianità. Per un cristianesimo non religioso* (Milano: Garzanti, 2002).

491 See Stala, Krzysztof, *Na marginesach rzeczywistości. O paradoksach przedstawiania w twórczości Brunona Schulza* (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich, 1995), pp. 208-214; Zawadzki, Andrzej, *Nowoczesna eseistyka filozoficzna w piśmiennictwie polskim pierwszej połowy XX wieku* (Kraków: Universitas, 2001), pp. 266-272.

paper, to come to life, to dance, to swarm into his eyes in leaps and jerks, and then in rolling circles...⁴⁹²; “And the song becomes a line, the breath of spring takes on forms, the soul’s intonation decorates itself in a rainbow of colors, while this tangled chaos of colors, strangely intertwined shapes and lines, breath and fragrance: it is all so different, so various, but in all of it sounds the same tone, the same chord, which embodies itself in ever new forms.”⁴⁹³

A particularly germane illustration of the “border” meanings of the ornament motif presented above would seem to be offered by Jaworski’s “Zepsuty ornament” (“The Broken Ornament”). Jaworski uses this motif consciously and treats it as a metaphor referring both to the oneiric-grotesque world created by him and to the very act of artistic representation. From the very beginning of the story, we notice the accumulation of ornamental motifs: dreamy, elongated fingers, tangled trees, young, curling leaves, the enormous leaf of a withering fern, a grotesque agave woman, and finally a strange ribbon, “almost entirely real,” which “in capricious coils [...] shimmers out” among the crowd and is described as “a symbol of one almost dimension.”⁴⁹⁴ This “almost” is here a sign of the ontological ambiguity of the represented world – its uncertain, weakened reality and the uncertainty of its meaning. Is this a world possessing independent being (as the beginning of the work seems to suggest)? Or is it a result of the narrator’s creative actions? On the one hand, it is the world itself – as viewed by the main character – which arranges itself into the form of an ornament. On the other hand, the narrator submits it to stylization – that is, he transforms and deforms it⁴⁹⁵: “And all the becoming around me passed before me into the coils of the ornament – in the pattern of the ribbon. I only had to lean forward and look at it from up close. I was like a short-sighted schoolboy hunched over his desk with exhaustion, drawing thick, clear outlines. The strip of whirling surroundings must have been tiring me, though I couldn’t feel it. In my brain, thought settled itself down and came to an end. I understood one thing – the mysterious ribbon might have been the expression of an

492 Przybyszewski, Stanisław, *De profundis* (Lwów: Lektor 1922), pp. 84-85.

493 Przybyszewski, Stanisław, *Z cyklu Wigilii* (Lwów: Księgarnia Polska, 1899), p. 9.

494 Jaworski, Roman, *Historie manjaków* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1978), p. 38.

In his introduction to *Historie manjaków*, Michał Głowiński discusses crippled, debased art in his comments on “The Broken Ornament.”

495 In this context, Anna Łebkowska emphasizes the artist’s unlimited creative possibilities, both in terms of the main character, who is a painter, and of the story’s narrator. See: Łebkowska, Anna, “Romana Jaworskiego gry z odbiorcą: *Historie manjaków*,” *Pamiętnik literacki* 1 (1981), pp. 14-15.

unknown thought shared by all of them. And on accepting this premise, I began to stylize.”⁴⁹⁶

Moreover, the main character and narrator of the story is not able to finish his work, despite the help of a hunchback he randomly meets in a train. The broken ornament is simultaneously an image crossed out with a “spiteful zig-zag” and a metaphor for impossible mimesis, in which every attempt to establish a permanent semantic order is undermined and questioned, since it is impossible to separate equivocally the internal from the external, reality from representation. Instead of a stable “demarcating line,” there is only an uncertain, mobile border, constantly changing its location: “Only the ribbon, the ribbon, tangling, ever tangling, ah, the ornament.”⁴⁹⁷

496 Jaworski, *Historie manjaków* p. 39.

497 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

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