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Stanzas

Word and Phantasm in Western Culture

GIORGIO AGAMBEN

Translated by Ronald L. Martinez

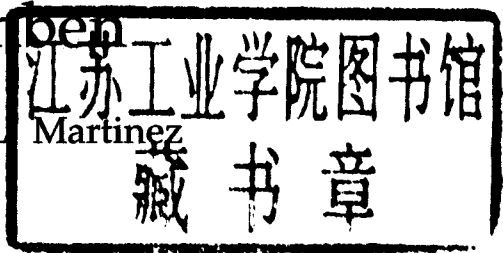
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Word and Phantasm

in Western Culture

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In memoriam Martin Heidegger

And here one must know that this term (stanza) has been chosen for technical reasons exclusively, so that what contains the entire art of the canzone should be called stanza, that is, a capacious dwelling or receptacle for the entire craft. For just as the canzone is the container (literally lap or womb) of the entire thought, so the stanza enfolds its entire technique . . .

Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* II.9

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The spellings “phantasm,” “phantasy,” and “phantastic” throughout the book indicate the technically precise use of these terms.

Translations that are not documented to a published English-language source may be assumed to be the translator’s own.

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Introduction

It is possible, perhaps, to accept that a novel may never actually recount the story it has promised to tell. But it is common to expect results of a work of criticism, or at least arguable positions and, as they say, working hypotheses. Yet when the term “criticism” appears in the vocabulary of Western philosophy, it signifies rather inquiry at the limits of knowledge about precisely that which can be neither posed nor grasped. If criticism, insofar as it traces the limits of truth, offers a glance of “truth’s homeland” like “an island nature has enclosed within immutable boundaries,” it must also remain open to the fascination of the “wide and storm-tossed sea” that draws “the sailor incessantly toward adventures he knows not how to refuse yet may never bring to an end.”

Thus for the Jena group, which attempted through the project of a “universal progressive poetry” to abolish the distinction between poetry and the critical-philological disciplines, a critical work worthy of the name was one that included its own negation; it was, therefore, one whose essential content consisted in precisely what it did not contain. The corpus of the European critical essay in the present century is poor in examples of such a genre. Leaving aside a work that by its very absence is “more than complete”—that of Félix Fénéon, *celui qui silence* (he who silences)—there is strictly speaking perhaps only a single book that deserves to be called critical: the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiel* (The origin of German tragic drama) of Walter Benjamin.

A certain sign of the extinction of such critical thinking is that among those who today draw their authority more or less from the same tradition there are many who proclaim the creative character of criticism—precisely when the arts

have for some time renounced all pretense at creativity. If the formula of “both poet and critic” (*poietes hama kai kritikos*), applied for the first time in antiquity to the Alexandrian poet-philologist Philitas, may once again serve as an exemplary definition of the modern artist, and if criticism today truly identifies with the work of art, it is not because criticism itself is also “creative,” but (if at all) insofar as criticism is also a form of negativity. Criticism is in fact nothing other than the process of its own ironic self-negation: precisely a “self-annihilating nothing,” or a “god that self-destructs,” according to Hegel’s prophetic, if ill-willed, definition. Hegel’s objection, that “Mister Friedrich von Schlegel,” Solger, Novalis, and other theoreticians of irony remained stalled at “absolute infinite negativity” and would have ended by making of the least artistic “the true principle of art,” marketing “the unexpressed as the best thing,” misses the point: that the negativity of irony is not the provisional negative of dialectic, which the magic wand of sublation (*Aufhebung*) is always already in the act of transforming into a positive, but an absolute and irretrievable negativity that does not, for that, renounce knowledge. The claim that a posture genuinely both philosophical and scientific (which has provided an essential impetus to Indo-European linguistics, among other things) arose from Romantic irony, precisely with the Schlegels, remains to be questioned in terms of the prospects for giving a critical foundation to the human sciences. For if in the human sciences subject and object necessarily become identified, then the idea of a science without object is not a playful paradox, but perhaps the most serious task that remains entrusted to thought in our time. What is now more and more frequently concealed by the endless sharpening of knives on behalf of a methodology with nothing left to cut—namely, the realization that the object to have been grasped has finally evaded knowledge—is instead reasserted by criticism as its own specific character. Secular enlightenment, the most profound project of criticism, does not possess its object. Like all authentic quests, the quest of criticism consists not in discovering its object but in assuring the conditions of its inaccessibility.

European poets of the thirteenth century called the essential nucleus of their poetry the *stanza*, that is, a “capacious dwelling, receptacle,” because it safeguarded, along with all the formal elements of the canzone, that *joi d’amor* that these poets entrusted to poetry as its unique object. But what is this object? To what enjoyment does poetry dispose its stanza as the receptive “womb” of its entire art? What does its *trobar* so tenaciously enclose?

Access to what is problematic in these questions is barred by the forgetfulness of a scission that derives from the origin of our culture and that is usually accepted as the most natural thing—that goes, so to speak, without saying—when in fact it is the only thing truly worth interrogating. The scission in question is that between poetry and philosophy, between the poetic word and the word of thought. This split is so fundamental to our cultural tradition that Plato could already declare it “an ancient enmity.” According to a conception that is only im-

PLICITLY contained in the Platonic critique of poetry, but that has in modern times acquired a hegemonic character, the scission of the word is construed to mean that poetry possesses its object without knowing it while philosophy knows its object without possessing it. In the West, the word is thus divided between a word that is unaware, as if fallen from the sky, and enjoys the object of knowledge by representing it in beautiful form, and a word that has all seriousness and consciousness for itself but does not enjoy its object because it does not know how to represent it.

The split between poetry and philosophy testifies to the impossibility, for Western culture, of fully possessing the object of knowledge (for the problem of knowledge is a problem of possession, and every problem of possession is a problem of enjoyment, that is, of language). In our culture, knowledge (according to an antinomy that Aby Warburg diagnosed as the “schizophrenia” of Western culture) is divided between inspired-ecstatic and rational-conscious poles, neither ever succeeding in wholly reducing the other. Insofar as philosophy and poetry have passively accepted this division, philosophy has failed to elaborate a proper language, as if there could be a royal road to truth that would avoid the problem of its representation, and poetry has developed neither a method nor self-consciousness. What is thus overlooked is the fact that every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge, just as every authentic act of philosophy is always directed toward joy. The name of Hölderlin—of a poet, that is, for whom poetry was above all problematic and who often hoped that it would be raised to the level of the *mēchanē* (mechanical instrument) of the ancients so that its procedures could be calculated and taught—and the dialogue that with its utterance engages a thinker who no longer designates his own meditation with the name of “philosophy” are invoked here to witness the urgency, for our culture, of rediscovering the unity of our own fragmented word.

Criticism is born at the moment when the scission reaches its extreme point. It is situated where, in Western culture, the word comes unglued from itself; and it points, on the near or far side of that separation, toward a unitary status for the utterance. From the outside, this situation of criticism can be expressed in the formula according to which it neither represents nor knows, but knows the representation. To appropriation without consciousness and to consciousness without enjoyment criticism opposes the enjoyment of what cannot be possessed and the possession of what cannot be enjoyed. In this way, criticism interprets the precept of Gargantua: “Science without consciousness is nothing but the ruin of the soul.” What is secluded in the *stanza* of criticism is nothing, but this nothing safeguards unappropriability as its most precious possession.

In the following pages, we will pursue a model of knowledge in operations such as the desperation of the melancholic or the *Verleugnung* (disavowal) of the fetishist: operations in which desire simultaneously denies and affirms its object, and thus succeeds in entering into relation with something that otherwise it would

have been unable either to appropriate or enjoy. This is the model that has provided the frame both for an examination of human objects transfigured by the commodity, and for the attempt to discover, through analysis of emblematic form and the tale (*ainos*) of the Sphinx, a model of signifying that might escape the primordial situation of signifier and signified that dominates Western reflection on the sign. From this perspective, one can grasp the proper meaning of the central project of the present inquiry—the reconstruction of the theory of the phantasm that subtends the entire poetic project bequeathed by troubadour and Stilnovist lyric to European culture and in which, through the dense textual *entrebescamen* (interlacing, interweaving) of phantasm, desire, and word, poetry constructed its own authority by becoming, itself, the *stanza* offered to the endless joy (*gioi che mai non fina*) of erotic experience.

Each of the essays gathered here thus traces, within its hermeneutic circle, a topology of joy (*gaudium*), of the *stanza* through which the human spirit responds to the impossible task of appropriating what must in every case remain unappropriable. The path of the dance in the labyrinth, leading into the heart of what it keeps at a distance, is the spatial model symbolic of human culture and its royal road (*hodos basileie*) toward a goal for which only a detour is adequate. From this point of view, a discourse that is aware that to hold “tenaciously what is dead exacts the greatest effort” and that eschews “the magic power that transforms the negative into being” must necessarily guarantee the unappropriability of its object. This discourse behaves with respect to its object neither as the master who simply negates it in the act of enjoyment nor like the slave who works with it and transforms it in the deferral of desire: its operation is, rather, that of a refined love, a *fin’amors* that at once enjoys and defers, negates and affirms, accepts and repels; and whose only reality is the unreality of a word “qu’amas l’aura / e chatz la lebre ab lo bou / e nadi contra suberna” [that heaps up the breeze / and hunts the hare with the ox / and swims against the tide (Arnaut Daniel, *canso* “En cest sonet coind’ e leri,” vv. 43-45)].

From this vantage one can speak of a topology of the unreal. Perhaps the *topos*, for Aristotle “so difficult to grasp” but whose power is “marvelous and prior to all others” and which Plato, in the *Sophist*, conceives as a “third genre” of being, is not necessarily something “real.” In this sense we can take seriously the question that Aristotle puts in the fourth book of the *Physics*: “Where is the capristag, where the sphinx?” (*pou gar esti tragelaphos he sphinx*). The answer, to be sure, is “nowhere”; but perhaps only because the terms in question are themselves *topoi*. We must still accustom ourselves to think of the “place” not as something spatial, but as something more original than space. Perhaps, following Plato’s suggestion, we should think of it as a pure difference, yet one given the power to act such that “what is not, will in a certain sense be; and what is, will in a certain sense not be.” Only a philosophical topology, analogous to what in mathematics is defined as an *analysis situs* (analysis of site) in opposition to

analysis magnitudinis (analysis of magnitude) would be adequate to the *topos outopos*, the placeless place whose Borromean knot we have tried to draw in these pages. Thus topological exploration is constantly oriented in the light of utopia. The claim that thematically sustains this inquiry into the void, to which it is constrained by its critical project, is precisely that only if one is capable of entering into relation with unreality and with the unappropriable as such is it possible to appropriate the real and the positive. Thus this volume is intended as a first, insufficient attempt to follow in the wake of the project that Robert Musil entrusted to his unfinished novel: a project that, a few years previously, the words of a poet had expressed in the formula “Whoever seizes the greatest unreality will shape the greatest reality.”

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Part I
The Phantasms of Eros

Now loss, cruel as it may be, cannot do anything against possession: it completes it, if you wish, it affirms it. It is not, at bottom, but a second acquisition—this time wholly internal—and equally intense.

Rilke

Many attempted in vain to say the most joyful things joyfully; here, finally, they are expressed in mourning.

Hölderlin

