Some Reflections on Narrative Thought

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Abstract: The author reexamines a number of foundational episodes in the history of western thought through the prism of the notion of “identity philosophy,” a category that includes both parmenidean metaphysics, predicated on the assumption of a transparent relationship between reality and logos, to the exclusion of the irrational and the nothing from the number of thinkable realities, and a Wittgenstein-influenced philosophy of language implying that nothing can be said unless it has previously been fitted to the mathematical form of linguistic articulation that is logics. The question arises of the truth value and sense of dimensions that eludes identity: event, tale and myth. The fact of literature implies that these dimensions somehow partake of truth and sense, but certainly not in the same way as philosophical discourse. How does this happen? What sort of legitimacy can literature draw from philosophy? What does it mean to step beyond Wittgenstein (while retaining some of his suggestions) and speak of “narrative thought?”

1.

We appear to be witnessing the growing influence of a certain neo-Parmenidean approach in the contemporary philosophical landscape. We are not talking of the real and genuine hyper-metaphysics that emerged in the final decades of the last century, at least in Italy, as one of the most original philosophical positions ultimately derived from the idealist and “spiritualist” tradition. We are referring to a post-metaphysical philosophy that draws instead on a kind of logical formalism. In short, it is no longer a question of returning to Parmenides, but of arriving at Wittgenstein. Via Parmenides, of course, and on the basis of a rigorous philosophy of identity, even if the identity in question is no longer that of being and thought, but that of language and world. The assertion of Parmenides that one can only think that which is (thinkable), is echoed by the insistence of Wittgenstein that one can only say that which is (sayable).

This perspective is based on a curious combination of foundationalism and relativism. The neo-Parmenideans are the standard-bearers for a very rigorous form of relativism, for they know that all philosophical conceptions,
not to mention religious ones, are nothing but opinions, and as such simply equivalent to one another, at once both believable and unbelievable: believable for those who believe them, and unbelievable for those who do not. But this knowledge stands firmly upon a foundation of truth. It is by virtue of this truth that the relative character of these opinions is affirmed in the first place. There is truth – which is incontrovertible precisely insofar as it recognizes the controvertible character of its own claims – and it is single: scientific truth.

And what about everything else? What are we do with the remainder? How can the irreducible character of an event be grasped in conceptual terms? Something happens, something unthinkable, something that I could never deduce or anticipate. The Holocaust for example (in calling it this, I already betray it, inserting the event into a logic of sacrifice that conceals its character as an event). I certainly cannot deduce it from a general theory of violence, or subsume it within the latter. But what follows from this? What does it mean to think such an event in truth? Firstly, I must recount what has happened exactly as it happened. But what then?

On the other hand, I may think of something that never happened at all, beginning with “myths.” It has been said that a myth is something that never happened because it “is” immemorially what it is. Simpler still, we may think of this or that legendary or more or less fabulous story that may involve the history of a people, or a family, or think of something in my own personal history – in each case a story that possesses or claims to possess some kind of truth value. At least for me. In the sense that in recounting the story to myself I have somehow become clearer about myself, have somehow become what I am – this holds for the individual, but it may also hold for a whole historical people, or for a whole social group. Do I really have to limit myself to the assumption that truth is something else entirely?

2.

It is a question, then, of Parmenides and Wittgenstein. This may seem a highly problematic and questionable coupling, but we must start here nonetheless. That is to say, we must start from the transparency of being to thought, or, as we might also say, from the identity of being and thought. In Parmenides, of course, this identity possesses a clearly metaphysical and ontological significance, whereas in Wittgenstein it manifests itself entirely on a formal-logical or rather linguistic level. But if for Parmenides the logos is being, is the rational structure of reality, is the thought that thinks the world as it truly is, and nothing else (you cannot think the nothing, or what is not, as Parmenides warns us), in Wittgenstein, by contrast, being is the logos, is that which can
be expressed in language, and nothing else (of what we cannot speak, we must remain silent, as Wittgenstein insisted).

And it is this very exclusion of the nothing, or the unsayable, from the realm of all discourse on truth, or arising from truth, which legitimates a philosophical project of “purifying” or formalizing language that dissolves ontology into logic and enjoins silence regarding everything else. While this position concedes a certain aesthetic dignity to this remainder, it denies it any access whatever to truth. Of the nothing, nothing now remains. The character of the nothing as event (something real even if also opaque and impenetrable) falls under an absolute and definitive kind of interdiction.

And what follows from this? Hilary Putnam has spoken about this problem in pointing out that this approach, though necessary in its way, also risked encouraging a sort of philosophical suicide. A philosophy incapable of attending to that remainder negates itself qua philosophy. It becomes philosophy more, becomes simply identical with this or that form of scientific knowledge, but is no longer philosophy. We will, of course, hear the objection that we can simply do without philosophy. This may be so. But are we prepared to ignore – to leave silent and unproblematized – all of those forms of experience which can only be addressed precisely in terms of the “unthinkable” that was ruled out of court in the first place?

In any case, this is not merely a question of a particular style of thought, but of a different conception of philosophy itself, of a certain paradigm change, in which the practice of philosophy cannot be assimilated to scientific models of knowledge, but does not thereby simply become a sort of fiction. It remains a form of knowing, albeit one of a quite particular kind. That is to say, it remains an interpretative or hermeneutic form of knowing. Whereas a mathematical theorem needs to be demonstrated, a story or a history needs to be interpreted. Thus the conception of philosophy that emerges here is that of philosophy as an interpretation of stories (stories that may deal with human beings and God alike) in the light of a possible truth.

This is a non-traditional conception of philosophy, one that conflicts with the dominant tradition of philosophy and may appear to be quite new. But it is not so new at all, for do not Vico, Hobbes, and Rousseau focus their attention precisely upon some founding episode in the history of human beings, namely the pact or covenant that first allows them to leave the state of nature and reveals the hypothetical hidden truth of their condition? And the imaginative perspectives explored by Kierkegaard, the way in which he entrusts himself to the use of pseudonyms, are these not typically narrative strategies? And then there is Nietzsche: nothing here is strictly demonstrated, everything is presented as narrative, as event, starting from that of “the death of God.” From this point of view, the idea of a thinking that interrogates the narratives
we tell, that expressly turns itself into a kind of narration, must be grasped as a recognition either that philosophy possesses an essentially narrative character or that literary narrative itself possesses a philosophical soul. And this is what we mean when we assert that the task of philosophy is precisely to explore hitherto unexplored regions of experience.

To acknowledge the “dark ground” of human existence and of being as such – something we find in the speculative mysticism of Böhme and Schelling, or in the notion of the “life world” in Husserl, and particularly in Blumenberg’s interpretation of Husserl – is to move beyond the parameters of the philosophy of identity (from Parmenides to Wittgenstein), but also beyond every kind of metaphysical rationalism (and especially that of Hegel). The philosophy of identity is based not only upon the identity of thought and being, but even before that upon the identity of being with itself. Being is. Non-being is not – and is not, in the sense that one cannot even say that it is not. Being is being: that is all we can say!

If, as Wittgenstein himself would have to admit, the unsayable resists this presumed unsayability, insists on its own reasons and calls for speech, impelling philosophy to turn to the “life world” in order to find, within the interstices of natural language, the voices that formal-logical language has condemned to silence – like a doctor who “auscultates” the pulmonary cavities to detect the signs of potential pathology – then it is clear the philosophy of identity has already been transcended. The same thing happened in the case of Schelling: being itself, as such, would eventually appear to him as other than itself, would thus resist all attempted identification with itself, precisely because being harbours within itself the possibility of non-being, of the nothing. And this possibility, which is thus a kind of freedom, cannot be annihilated, if being is not simply to collapse into the double, support, or repetition of the existent.

Metaphysical rationalism, on the other hand – and Hegel is exemplary in this regard – remains faithful to the philosophy of identity, even if this identity is posited at the beginning (as the abstract and negative identity of being and nothing) but discovered at the end (as the concrete and positive identity in which being has become spirit and the nothing has been vanquished for ever). Here the “dark ground” is permeated by the victorious light that overcomes all dualism and consumes every irreducible residue of non-being that might still cling to being. Tragedy, therefore, like art in general, is something that belongs to the past. We live in a time and age where spirit has finally triumphed over the powers of the negative, and above all over the power of the nothing. Philosophy no longer deigns to acknowledge them, and effectively disowns them. We cannot even say that it negates or denies them, for it simply drops them, leaving the nothing to the nothing, once again in accordance with the ancient doctrine of Parmenides.
It should be no surprise, therefore, that it is art assumes the burden of something even more significant than the forgetfulness of being, namely the forgetfulness of the nothing. Art offers itself expressly as a remembrance of the nothing. And in fact it remembers the nothing in two ways: one that is more immediately apparent and striking, and one that is deeper and, we might say, more philosophical in character. In the first case, art remembers that the nothing is the nothing, that is to say, it remembers that the truth of the nothing does not bend or yield to the truth of being. For the truth of the nothing is what it is, and wants to be heard for what it is: as hard, bitter, and tragic, since it is by virtue of the nothing, and its indomitable power, that evil comes to obscure the good, that the good is negated and thus also posited in spite of all, that the darkness is revealed as darker than the absence of light, although the darkness would not even be without the light. In the second case, art remembers not only that the nothing possesses a truth of its own, which is perhaps not so difficult to accommodate after all, but that the nothing even precedes the truth insofar as it furnishes the condition and presupposition of every authentic revelation of meaning.

In both cases, we can see that Leopardi has made a fundamental contribution here. In the Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia Leopardi acknowledged “the fearful and yawning abyss” that is the nothing, but he also understood the nothing as the original principle (“the origin of all things […] is the nothing”) that allows us to glimpse the deepest and most intimate secret of the world: the mysterious contending lightness of its being. And we must say the same for Celan. As far as the philosophers are concerned, we must obviously mention the name of Heidegger in this connection (even if Heidegger ascribed certain insights to himself that he only partly deserves insofar as it was Schelling, and not only Schelling, who had already expressly placed the nothing in relation to the meaning and the truth of being). But if we wish to find a certain notion of “opening” that may lie at the root of a new form of civic humanism, then the first author we should recognize is surely Giambattista Vico.

3.

The problem at issue essentially concerns the cognitive value of literature in general, and that of the novel or narrative tale in particular. We should ask ourselves the question: who knows what in this connection? Let us take the case of the novel. One certainly cannot say that is the task of a novel to provide us with knowledge about the world. Even if it does do so, this is clearly not the essential point. However much information we may glean from War
and Peace with regard to Russia at the time of the Napoleonic invasion of that country, we would not know what to do with it if it were not for something else. But what exactly?

It is something that cannot simply be found somewhere outside the novel, that is to say, in the real world, a world that possesses an independence of its own, and of which the novel furnishes a certain representation. But nor is it something that simply lies inside the novel, for this “something” is the novel, and the novel for its part is nothing but the exhibition of this being of its own. But again, what exactly is this being? There is no doubt here. It is a fiction. Something fabricated. But we may easily incur more than one kind of misunderstanding here. Let us therefore attempt to be as clear as possible, and principally with regard to the concept of fiction in the context of literature.

The fact that we are talking about a fiction by no means excludes, indeed expressly includes, the truth of what is fictively simulated or “feigned” as Vico would say. We are not referring to the objective truth about the world, or to the subjective truth about the author, but to the truth that makes itself into a world in and through the author and, even more fundamentally, in and through the work. Although the novel says nothing that we did not perhaps already know, or could not come to know by other means, the fictional character of the text allows what we might call a certain horizon of intelligibility to spread in such a way that everything that falls within the compass of the work appears in a new perspective. The more effectively such a world is realized, the richer the meanings it reveals, the more it is capable of posing significant questions for the very figures and characters it presents, so that the latter in turn can embody responses to these questions.

Every reader of novels knows this perfectly well: once we have finished the book, it is not that the world has changed; on the contrary, the world is exactly what it was before (so much so we may well feel disappointed to return to it). Nonetheless, our outlook upon the world has been altered, perhaps in an almost imperceptible way, as if we had finally recognized something in front of us that we had never fully noticed it before, or altered in a more striking way, as when we suddenly confronted with the Nachtseite, with a previously hidden and darker side of reality.

This is why Novalis could rightly say that the reading of a novel should leave us with a certain music in our ears, and that this is what matters (rather than the plot, or the environment etc., all things that may be forgotten). This music is a kind of knowledge which puts us in tune with the rhythm, at once ancient and ever new, of time itself. Aristotle had already observed something comparable in the opening remarks of his Poetics (as Eugen Fink has pointed out) when he derived the pleasure we take in “imitation” from our capacity for play and rhythm rather than from that of mirroring or reproducing that
which, being already there, has no need to be reproduced. And no one, in fact, has ever shed more light than Vico upon the phenomenon in question here. He pointed out that “fabula” signifies “favella vera” [true speech]. The Latin “fabula” is related to fateor (I recognize, I confess), but also to faveo (I favour, I flourish). It is through la favola, the tale or story, that human beings create the world, that they create their world.

For Vico it is precisely through recounting fables, through telling stories to themselves, that human beings begin relinquish that blind and brutish condition in which they found themselves ab origine, and thus become what they are destined to become: human beings rather than beasts. Of course, the fables are fables, and the stories are stories: inventions that have little to do with truth, except in a strange and cryptic form. Nonetheless, it was by gathering together in the lucus, that is, in the clearing or breach opened up in the very heart of the ancient forests, that human beings began to assume their own being and destiny, struggling to read the enigmatic signs that seemed addressed to them, and furnishing responses that correspond, even in a purely fictive or metaphorical way, to the original event of being. We may thus ask, with Vico, where the truth of the human being is to be found. Does it lie in the state of nature or in the condition of civilization? The reply is evident, and Vico captures it precisely in the formula: favola, favella vera.

4.

Here I would like to clarify, albeit in a cursory manner, two specific points that I think are particularly important. The first concerns the way that truth and falsity may coexist in the same state of affairs (as in the phrase: the world appears absurd and meaningless, and this also holds for the artistic representation of this statement), where we are talking about a form of thinking located beyond the principle of identity and non-contradiction, or at least one that is capable of acknowledging and sustaining contradiction (acknowledging for example that reality itself is contradictory). The second concerns an even graver aporia that seems to derive from such a form of thinking, namely that between a dualism (implicit in the “double” discourse suggested by the fictive or mythical character of every narrated event) and a monistic of the One (suggested by the idea of an inexhaustible truth that implies that we are “here in one way, and there in another”).

Of course, there is no question of denying the validity of the principle of non-contradiction. This principle remains valid in its own field, namely in that of formal logic. Once again it is the distinction between logic and ontology that must be firmly upheld here. That reality is contradictory can very
well be true (and is indeed true). But it is false to say that reality is at one and the same time both contradictory and non-contradictory. Thus the principle of non-contradiction does not resolve or dissolve the antinomic character of reality, but rather confirms it.

With regard to the quite scandalous fact that the metaphysics of the One, derived as it is from Platonic (and Plotinian) sources, has been able to survive alongside a form of tragic dualism (which is a matter of tragedy rather than metaphysics, the tragedy that modernity has rediscovered in Dostoyevsky, as well as in Shakespeare or Kleist), this is certainly a serious problem in its own right. Nonetheless, it was Plotinus who rescued the nothing from the condemnation it had suffered at the hands of the philosophy of identity, and showed how the nothing is the ground of being, just as we must always appeal to the principle of non-contradiction in order to assert the radically conflictual character of reality. And why do I say this? Because it is only in this way that the ontology of the nothing, or the meta-ontology, that provides the necessary background for our discourse as a whole can be preserved from potentially irrationalistic interpretations and developed in a genuinely thorough manner. We must remember that we are indeed talking about an ontology of freedom, but one that is possible (and is only possible) insofar as it is also an ontology of the nothing. Once we have acknowledged the inextricable bond between freedom and the nothing, and thus grasped that freedom and the nothing simul stabunt simul cadunt, since freedom without the nothing is simply inconceivable and the nothing without freedom is devoid of all meaning, then we can, or rather must, be prepared to learn from the teaching of Plotinus as well as that of Dostoyevsky.

There is no simple opposition here, no aut aut. On the contrary, we find a consummate reciprocity of relations, as we might expect once we recognize Dostoyevsky as the culmination of a tradition of thought (of an eastern form of mysticism) that can be traced right back to Plotinus. For it is true that in Plotinus the nothing “releases” freedom, so to speak, and this accentuates its emergent and productive character. The whole cosmos thus reflects this freedom and offers a luminous image of the original act by which the demiurge (not for nothing described as the poietes) drew it from out of the abyss without needing to provide any reason for its act, but thereby showing itself infinitely capable of all possible reasons. And it is true, likewise, that in Dostoyevsky freedom originally appears in relation to the nothing and as threatened by the nothing, so that it is constantly haunted by its self-destructive shadow, turning freedom into an almost unbearable burden, a torment, a tragedy – and in indeed the “burden of freedom,” the “torment of freedom,” “the tragedy of freedom” are the expressions that best capture its character.

But again, there is straightforward opposition here. As we can clearly see from the way in which each position tends to revert to the other. There are cer-
tain passages in Plotinus where the idea of the nothing as the ground of freedom is developed in terms of a kind of self-destruction and specifically employed to describe hell as an absolute desire to serve evil, one’s own evil. And there are passages in Dostoyevsky where the idea freedom as a victory over the nothing allows for a joyful affirmation of being that hints at pure paradise.

5.

And this brings us, inevitably, to the problem concerning the truth of art, and thus the truth of beauty. Of course, we must acknowledge today that this problem is ostentatiously disowned or marginalized. Contemporary art no longer knows what to do with the idea of beauty and would rather expressly reject the idea in principle. How remote the words of Dostoyevsky must appear in this connection: “Beauty is the battlefield where God and Satan contend for the heart of man.” And even earlier he had claimed: “The world will be saved by beauty” (but even Prince Myshkin, in The Idiot, to whom the remark belongs, seems perplexed by the idea himself, and how much more perplexed are we, who inhabit a world that is obsessed by beauty, yet discover every day that we live in the ugliest world known to man).

In short, are we still essentially concerned with the beauty that “decides” on our fate, on our salvation, on the meaning of our life? It would surely seem not. And yet ... Baudelaire asks, in his Hymn to Beauty from Spleen and Ideal, if beauty hails from some ancient heaven, or from infernal depths: “viens-tu du ciel ou sorts-tu de l’abîme, ô Beauté?” And Rilke, in the second of his Duino Elegies, describes beauty as the beginning of horror, “nichts als des Schrecklichen Anfang.” These are not archaic voices, but voices uttering a question that touches the essence of modernity itself. But we shall not pursue this matter here. Let us consider the principal point at issue.

For it is the “decisive” feature of beauty – and this renders it the most elusive and fleeting thing of all – that it also prompts the free play, as Kant would say, of meaning in general, that is to say, of the meaning of our life. Is beauty then a path to the true and the good, implying both even as it excludes them? This way of recovering Plato by means of Kant, as Schopenhauer for one envisaged it, certainly has its own difficulties. And Lévinas, amongst others, has specifically drawn attention to them. The Lévinasian objection is a powerful one and essentially consists in a critique of aesthetic semblance itself, for “appearance,” as art, merely feigns a relation to the true and the good, while in reality negating them and evading their claims. On the one hand, that is to say, art positions itself beyond good and evil, or more precisely before them, in the sense that good and evil may serve as a pretext, while in fact aesthetic semblance is wholly
indifferent to both; and on the other hand, it positions itself beyond truth, or more precisely before it, in the sense that whatever particular cognitive strategy is adopted here it always and inevitably leads to the arbitrary and excessive fabrication of perspectives on the world that are entirely ungrounded.

Lévinas concedes that the work of art reveals something like the “truth of being” in the Heideggerean sense, but the truth of being is neither “mine” nor “thine,” and is thus a form of untruth. He is prepared to admit that the work of art does embody values and involves moral principles, but it does so in an entirely representational and playful manner, and in this sense remains alien to any authentic moral seriousness. In short, according to Lévinas, the aesthetic dimension is afflicted by an intrinsic and original vice: the vice of aestheticism itself. And worse still is the pan-aestheticism of a Nietzsche, in which art becomes an essentially totalizing and, above all, alienating dimension of experience. And life then enjoys no meaning or significance whatsoever except as a kind of artistic creation and invention (and this, in the last analysis, is aesthetic thought in the “grand style”).

Nonetheless, Nietzsche is not the only possible outcome of the romantic revolution and of the idea that art represents an absolutely decisive dimension of human experience. Nietzsche grafts his own anti-Platonic project onto the trunk of romanticism and dissolves the three moments that are originally one (the true, the good, and the beautiful) into the realm of beautiful appearance. But there is also romanticism that is entirely coloured and suffused by impulses that derive from the neo-Platonic tradition. And this is the romanticism on which both Baudelaire and Dostoevsky effectively drew, one which developed an ontology of beauty that does not succumb to the critique of aesthetic semblance, but rather recognized this very critique as confirmation of the claim that beauty is something entirely real, if also highly enigmatic, and something profoundly revelatory in character. Must we then admit that Dostoyevsky and Baudelaire (along with Rilke and many others) both knew and did not know what they were really saying? I believe that we must.

6.

And it is on this path that the thought of the event, which is an intrinsically narrative form of thought that questions its own essential content, namely myth, fable, and story (and thus questions the value of all this), comes to encounter tragic thought as well. Or more simply put, encounters the tragic itself. As long as it appropriates the tragic, precisely as its own essential content.

In this regard, it must be admitted, we have tended to think in terms of a certain schema that typically sees the classical era and the Christian era
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as offering two fundamentally antithetical perspectives on the world, and this in turn has led to certain further conclusions that are now largely taken for granted. For the ancient Greeks, on this view of things, human finitude itself, and the phenomenon of death in particular, allegedly represented absolute, ineluctable, and thus irredeemable dimensions of existence, whereas the Christian idea of redemption was thought to open up hitherto inconceivable prospects, such as personal salvation, eternal happiness, and a joy that is indissolubly one with the self-affirmation of God himself, the origin and end of all things. It was thus taken as self-evident that the dimension of “the tragic” is an essential feature of the Greek outlook, but not of our own.

But are we really so sure that this is right? Can we simply ignore the fact that the sense of the tragic has witnessed at least two remarkable revivals in the modern age, in between the 16th and 17th centuries and in between the 18th and 19th centuries. Have we really nothing to learn from Kierkegaard’s thesis regarding the character of ancient and modern tragedy? In this regard we only have to consider the concept of guilt, whether it is interpreted as _hamartia_, or is understood in terms of _sin_, where the antithesis between the two resulting conceptions seems clearly and sharply delineated.

In the first case, as the famous saying of Anaximander suggests, we are talking about a kind of “debt” that the individual incurs in relation to other individuals and to being itself, one which must be repaid by giving the portion that one has been granted in life back to being in turn. Thus guilt in the ancient sense of _hamartia_ belongs intrinsically to the order of things, rather than to the individual responsibility of the subject, and above all represents the restitution of a cosmic rupture that always already transpires. It is simply a limited disturbance within time, one that time reabsorbs and resolves in turn, just as one resolves an outstanding debt. In the second case things are very different.

For in the case of “sin” (and what is properly called original sin), the responsibility in question is not only extended to include the entire seed of Adam, but is also drawn from a still more profound level, beyond any particular imputation in terms of specific intentional acts. Here every human being is made responsible for having been born in the first place, almost as if each individual now had to assume a kind of original punishment, were now called to answer for everything to everyone, and most especially to God. There is evidently a paradox here, and what is more, a paradox that challenges the purely moral consciousness, while simultaneously invoking the idea of redemption as something that neither lies in the hands of human beings themselves, nor indeed belongs to the natural order of things, since it is only God who can redeem and transfigure the original disturbance that man first introduced into being, and indeed into the nothing.
From this point of view, we must acknowledge an antithesis, a substantial opposition, between the ancient and the modern conceptions of the tragic. But the matter looks rather different if we consider the concept of guilt with respect to what ancient and modern conceptions of tragedy share in this regard. Although it is quite true that guilt, as far as ancient tragedy is concerned, is bound up with the law of blood and kinship, the law of lineage, while the modern conception of tragedy is bound up with the law of God, nonetheless in both cases the deeds of the guilty party generates a collision that radiates outwards from the protagonist to involve the whole of reality. This situation compels the protagonist (like Oedipus as presented by Sophocles) to answer before the city for a crime that no court of law would strictly impute to him, or again (as with Prince Sigismondo in Calderón, or Ivan Karamazov in Dostoyevsky) to recognize himself as the bearer of an unmerited punishment. We are confronted with a telling reversal of roles here: ancient tragedy, beyond the saying of Anaximander, assumes the principle of the responsibility for everything before everyone, while Christian tragedy appropriates the theme of expiation from the heritage of Greek wisdom.

These considerations help us to understand why the form of tragedy, which flourished in ancient Greece for only a few decades and thus remained a rather limited phenomenon, could powerfully re-emerge at the heart of a modernity that is intellectually careless to describe as simply anti-tragic in character. In fact, the problem of the tragic remains a problem for us. The Greek and the Christian conceptions of “tragedy” may be two different things. But we still do not know how to characterize them except under this single name.

And we come, finally, to our own present. Expressions such as abandonment, nomadism, and errance appears to reflect the literary and philosophical climate in which thought seems naturally to embrace narrative considerations and understand itself as essentially narrative in character. And the background to this whole development lies in the crisis of metaphysical rationalism, of which it even in a sense represents a kind of culmination, for what is basically being contested here is the Hegelian attempt – the last and most ambitious of such attempts – to think the event of being in purely conceptual terms, to deduce the process of becoming, to capture history within the transparent structure of the Idea. We are dealing with a genuine reversal of perspective here, with the endeavour to overcome every philosophy of identity (whether the Parmenidean identity of thought and being or the Hegelian identity of reality and self-consciousness). Do we have to define this philosophical, though
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not merely philosophical, *détour* by reference to the thought of Heidegger? We can of course do so, but only on the condition that we also attend to that alternative voice represented by Lévinas, but also by Blanchot and Bataille, all of whom would naturally merit detailed discussion in their own right.

But however things stand in this regard, it remains the case that such expressions (abandonment, nomadism, and errance) have generated a rhetoric that has defused the underlying issue here, namely the crisis of metaphysical rationalism. As a consequence the ideal of a truth that cannot be captured within the enchanted circle of *arche* and *telos* falls into insignificance or becomes a meaningless refrain in the background. This ideal collapses exhausted upon itself, turns on itself, loses sight of what is essential, namely that we are now effectively venturing into regions where losing our way really means losing our way, where exodus may encounter fulfilment in return, but then again may not, and encounter only the nothing. For this, once again, is the problem: the nothing, the nothing as real possibility. Without the nothing, without the real possibility of annihilation, there is no way of exploring the dark side of the moon, and no experience of the negative (and by the negative here I do not simply mean the more innocuous of its manifestations, but all of those which effectively come together here, beginning with the most uncanny and forgotten guest of all, which is not nihilism but evil).

Basically speaking, the great era of the novel, the 19th century, and the uncompleted age of its decline, the 20th century, are vitally engaged with these questions, with these essentially philosophical issues, albeit issues that philosophy itself has resoundingly “omitted” to address. But philosophy and the novel have not for all that simply parted ways. Quite the contrary, in fact.

But in effect the novel has more to say to say to philosophy than philosophy has to say to the novel. The novel is essentially an expression of *peripeteia*. For this reason, as Erich Auerbach justly observed in his own time, there is no novel that does not recount a journey of some kind, even if it be only a journey around one’s own room, or a journey in one’s own head. The novel is thus *exodos* and *nostos*. But in this *peripeteia* the novel “knows” (and this is indeed a real and genuine knowing) that at every moment it is possible for to go astray, to lose our way, when the possibility of return is not already inscribed in the original point of departure or the wandering pathway itself.

Well aware that there are dimensions of irreducible negativity, such as death and madness, the romantics desired to go and explore these things. Not of course that this was an entirely original idea. Others before them had attempted to do so. But, like Aeneas, they had always carried a golden twig that ensured the possibility of successful return. The romantics, on the other hand, renounce the use of such devices. They wish to voice the dread of those who despair of all return. Can one who dies perhaps return to tell the tale of
how it was? Can one immured in madness objectively relate this experience? The romantics choose the instrument of literature rather than philosophy. They know that philosophy, searching after the truth of being, in the plurality of stories basically only finds the one true story, or a single history, as Heidegger himself still does. But it is not the history of being that interests them, but the truth of the nothing.

Here begins a new history of being (among many other possible histories). And it will be exactly that – a history, and a story. One that will have to be narrated. And at the same time will have to be thought. But thought in narrative terms.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)