Aldo G. Gargani
The Manifold Turns of Truth
A biographical-theoretical interview with
Manlio Iofrida

Abstract: In the following interview with Manlio Iofrida, Aldo Giorgio Gargani retraces the fundamental moments and key phases of his intellectual development: his early childhood and adolescence in Genoa, strongly marked by the influence of his artist father and of the social context of the immediate post-war situation; his studies at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, and subsequently at the University of Oxford, which resulted to his first book on Wittgenstein; the achievement during the 1960s of a distinctive philosophical position of his own, reflected in the publication of the book II sapere senza fondamenti [Knowledge without Foundations]; the renewal of philosophical culture in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, in which Gargani himself was one of the main protagonists; the return to an engagement with Wittgenstein, after a period in which he had dedicated himself principally to literary questions and concerns, one pursued specifically in the context of the new issues raised at the beginning of the 21st century. This historical and autobiographical reconstruction of his intellectual career is accompanied at every turn by philosophical reflections on our contemporary situation and by specific critical responses to other contemporary philosophical trends and developments: the interview thus constitutes a telling summation of the fundamental themes and aspects of the author’s thought in general.

1. Nietzsche, Genoa and the FGCI

Iofrida: Over the course of a long intellectual career you have witnessed some remarkably various and significant historical times: from the 1950s through to the radical perspectives opened up in the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of completely new cultural and political developments in the 1980s, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and now the rather uncertain and confused situation of the present. In the 1960s you were already a leading interpreter and commentator of contemporary philosophical and scientific thought, but since that time you have become ever more closely involved as a protagonist in current intellectual debates. But since the importance of biographical factors, and of early childhood experiences, has also found increasing acknowledgement in your more recent work, I should like to begin with the following question: can you describe the moral, political, and cultural character of Genoa, the city
where you were born and where you began your own earliest studies, during the late 1940s and the early 1950s? Were you already familiar in any way with the work of Nietzsche? And what was your particular attitude to politics at this time? For, ever since I have known you, I believe that you have always expressed considerable interest in politics, even if this has also been accompanied by a certain sense of distance – by an insistence on the importance of individual autonomy in relation to the collective.

Gargani: It is rather interesting and amusing to relate that my first memory regarding Nietzsche goes back precisely to this time in Genoa. On my very first day at primary school my father was leading me up the Battistine, the street where Nietzsche briefly resided when he stayed in Genoa, and he saw a very old woman knitting away in her chair at the side of the street near her door – it was still a warm morning – and my father, who was holding my hand as we walked up, halted and asked her: “how was Nietzsche? And the old woman replied: “A good man, a saint.” That is my first memory of Nietzsche, of whom my father – a painter, an anarchist, and a rather avant-garde individual – was a great admirer. And of course Nietzsche and Schopenhauer were more or less cult figures in the culture that shaped my father’s generation, the generation that had gone through the First World War, and was well versed in Russian writers such as Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, in French literature, and in Nietzsche and Schopenhauer as well; I remember that when one of my father’s associates, who was actively involved in the Resistance, once had to flee in order to avoid arrest, he took off with a little bag containing tooth-paste, a pair of socks, and a copy of Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*. Such things can be seen as characteristic signs of the age, of the outlook and sensibility of the time. But Genoa also deserves mention in its own right, as a city that was still rather narrow and provincial in character, with a culturally somewhat undeveloped bourgeois class, a city rather lacking in social culture, certainly rich in interesting individuals – one may think of Montale, Sbarbaro, and others – but, as I say, without a real shared social culture. I also remember, from the period when I first came into contact with the FGCI [the *Federazione Giovanile Comunista Italiana*] as a high school student, that it was an extremely rigid political party, very Stalinist, with certain harsh and stubborn features that derived directly from the “partisan” beginnings of some of its leading figures, with great disdain for any culture that was not the specific culture of the Party, or not associated with Russian culture. I remember, for example, that the party spokesman for culture in Genoa regarded Delio Cantimori with considerable skepticism and distaste. There was thus this great rigidity, a prevailing attitude of suspicion towards anything that might encourage deviations from the official line – in short, a rather unsmil-
ing atmosphere of pervasive ideological commitment. Nonetheless, given the background of my father, and the environment of painters who entertained a rather irrationalist outlook on life, I got involved in the Party because I felt that I might discover there the roots and the resources of a different sort of culture, a more rational culture, one more grounded in history, more social in character, and so on. And all this, quite apart from more specific socio-political concerns, from a particular interest in the self-emancipation of the oppressed, was a significant factor in my own attraction to the Party. This was a period when workers would buy their Einaudi books in installments, and one such worker told me that tears would come into his eyes when he struggled to read these things at home in the evening after a very long day’s work. These were the years which saw the publication of the *Universale economica*, a series of books that was promoted by the Italian Communist Party, of the famous edition of Voltaire’s *Treatise on Tolerance*, with an “Introduction” by Togliatti, of the works of Diderot, and many other texts from the age of the Enlightenment …

*Iofrida*: You were very young at this time …

*Gargani*: Yes, I was between fifteen and eighteen years old.

*Iofrida*: And this was your first experience of politics …

*Gargani*: I was actively involved in the FGCI when I was at High School, although I was also very isolated in this respect since no one else there was interested in politics. This was a handsome and impressive school in Genoa, the *Cristoforo Colombo*, where I had some outstanding teachers, so much so that I still deeply missed the presence of these school teachers later on when I was studying in Pisa. One of them was Costanzo Mignone, an excellent teacher of philosophy, and an exemplary individual from the pedagogic point of view since he really taught us to think; and there were others, especially the mathematics teacher who introduced me to the pleasures of physics and mathematics – with the result that when I left the Liceo I was already strongly drawn to the idea of pursuing a scientific course of study.

*Iofrida*: This is an interesting point, for I believe this preoccupation with science has never really left you,

*Gargani*: That is quite true.

*Iofrida*: So what was it then that drew you towards the study of philosophy?
Aldo G. Gargani

Gargani: I felt that philosophy was the thing that could help me discover myself more fully, that it touched a more profound vein of experience. I should say that at some point during my time at the Liceo, as far as the FGCI was concerned, I already began to chafe at the cultural censorship involved, which was really extreme at this time. When I was a boy, my brothers, who are all much older than me, had collected all the issues of Vittorini’s Politecnico, and I heard them talk about the debates between Fabrizio Onofri and Palmiro Togliatti, before the latter persuaded Einaudi to shut down the journal in question. Later on, when Vittorini had left, on account of the “Tito” episode of 1948 if I am not mistaken, Togliatti wrote, under the pseudonym of Roderigo di Castiglia, that “Vittorini has scarpered, and left us behind,” in a typically aggressive and derisive tone; but it was exactly the same tone that was also adopted with regard to psychoanalysis, or abstract art, and so on. This conflict soon became intolerable for me. I had already knew a number of intellectuals who were not politically committed, and who were all older than me – I was still little more than a teenager at the time – and I remember it was like living in a cage: to be a militant in the FGCI effectively meant that one could not appreciate abstract art, or the music of Schoenberg, etc. etc. This was all part of a process, so to speak, that culminated in me submitting a letter of resignation to the FGCI. Thereupon I was summoned to appear before them, and subjected to a sort of interrogation in which they claimed that I had not actually written the latter, and that it was necessary to find out who had, and so on and forth … All because there was always this general attitude of suspicion about everything. I don’t know if you are familiar with the case of the historian Salvatore Rotta, who, as it happens, died only recently …

Iofrida: Yes, indeed I am.

Gargani: Well, they actually suspected him of being in the pay of the CIA! This was the atmosphere in which one could feel downright guilty merely for sympathizing with certain currents of contemporary culture – and this is how I came to experience the full gloominess, oppressiveness, and suffocating narrowness of the dirigiste, Stalinist, and Soviet perspective on things – and especially in Genoa which seemed so tightly organized along these lines, whereas in various meetings and conferences in other Italian cities I encountered a very different atmosphere, a much more open and less regimented spirit.

Iofrida: But all of this transpired before you arrived at the Scuola Normale in Pisa?
Gargani: Indeed, even before I finished at the Liceo. The whole experience transpired during my time at the Gymnasium and the two levels of the Liceo.

Iofrida: An experience of individual self-definition, and a sense of increasing distance in relation to the collective …

Gargani: Yes, indeed. Other members of my family were also involved in the communist experience of the time, as I have already pointed out, and I could also mention a number of direct indications in this regard: one of my brothers was active for some considerable time as an editor of the communist newspaper L’Unità. Thus it came about that when I was still at the Gymnasium I had the opportunity to engage in discussions with Tortorella, the deputy director of the newspaper; when I told him that Cassirer had argued that all philosophy was basically a commentary on Plato and Aristotle, he replied, with his swallowed R’s that only seemed to render his words more imperious: “This is a grave ideological error,” etc. etc. Today, it is really hard to imagine what this intellectual environment was like, and how intimidating it was. It was almost as if they were aping the anti-Soviet films that the Americans were producing at the time, as if they were competing with the latter to produce comparable caricatures of reality.

2. The Trauma of Budapest and the Cultural and Intellectual Experience of Pisa and Oxford

Iofrida: So you already arrived at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa with a significant range of human and intellectual experience behind you: can you describe the general political and cultural atmosphere that you found there? And what about the effects of Gentile’s legacy, the increasingly strong presence of communist culture, the teaching of Cantimori? – and did you actually follow any of his courses?

Gargani: I entered the Scuola Normale in 1957 – I undertook the entrance examinations in 1956 and effectively enrolled in 1957. This was an institution where there was no real political life, no political contestation: it was about ten years since the end of the war, and subsequent to the immediate post-war generation who had been very politically aware; in this sense I encountered a rather privatized culture, one focused largely on the demands of personal study and research. But then again, for my part, given my own personal history, it was not really politics that I was looking for at the time anyway: all my dedication and commitment were directed toward the field of study too.
Iofrida: Yet you said that the immediate post-war period was one of considerable politicization?

Gargani: There had previously been people at the Scuola Normale with Left wing political sympathies, such as Russo; but when we first entered the place there was very little talk of politics, and this only started up again with the arrival of Cazzaniga, and of Adriano Sofri, that is to say, in the early 1960s when the atmosphere was beginning to change. But one must realize that, basically, even in those years, Cazzaniga and others like him were the exception rather than the rule, for, as I remember it, the young men and women at the Scuola Normale were largely preoccupied with their own futures and careers, their own personal and emotional lives, their own studies, and they embraced the cultural possibilities open to them from a perspective that completely ignored specific political or ideological considerations.

Iofrida: We are talking about the period after 1956, after the shock of the events in Hungary.

Gargani: Yes, and we were preparing for our entrance examinations at the very time when the uprising in Budapest was unfolding; and this also undoubtedly helped to reduce the political tension and dampen political participation on the Left in these years; this was when Cantimori, whose courses I never actually followed myself, resigned from the Italian Communist Party, along with many others. I must say that I found the Scuola Normale a very congenial environment from the social point of view. I remember being actively involved in so much debate and discussion – perhaps I actually studied rather more when I was at the Liceo di Genova than I did at the Scuola Normale, for here one was constantly seduced by the Siren calls of conversation, by the constant opportunity of exchanging thoughts and ideas. And this also led – and this is something that proved particularly significant for me – to discussions with the members of the science faculties, with mathematicians like Mario Mirando, for example, with physicists like Di Giacomo, who had a much “broader” and far less specialist conception of physics than most. I also remember that di Giacomo helped me to translate the Ars combinatoria of Leibniz: so you can see that there were also exchanges going on between quite different areas and disciplines. And then again my fellow students on these courses (or those with only a single year between us) included Mario Ascheri (the expert on Hegel and Feuerbach), Giulio Lepschy, Carlo Ginzburg, Bodei, Stussi, Paola Palareti, who graduated, like me, under Francesco Barone, and who would later become my wife, and Carla Forti who graduated in history under Saitta, and wrote a book on Pardo Roques. We were a very close-knit group in the sense that we regularly consorted and talked with one another over a five year
period, sharing plans and projects that extended beyond the *Scuola Normale* into our future lives, and subsequently led to further encounters and cultural collaborations of one kind or another. With all these people I enjoyed a really intense range of discussions, a constant exchange of ideas regarding the choices and decisions we were making, and the intellectual paths that we were exploring; everyone spoke about what he or she was doing with everyone else, always comparing ideas with each other, and in my case, perhaps even more than for the others, there was also an intense exchange of ideas with the scientists. This proved to be very important for me, especially with regard to a fundamental decision that I made at this time, namely the decision to dedicate myself to analytical philosophy and the philosophy of science.

*Iofrida:* Thus the *Scuola Normale*, at this particular moment, was marked by an emphatic detachment from any particular social and political engagement, but also by an atmosphere that made it into a sort of permanent and extremely lively seminar.

*Gargani:* Yes, we also discussed and debated at mealtimes; there were four tables, and at the head of each one we would have someone on the point of completing their studies, or an assistant teacher, or one of the principal teachers like Cantimori (once we managed to pass him a bowl of pasta in which we had poured a huge quantity of salt, and he joined in on the joke), or again one of the language teachers; so there was plenty of opportunity even at mealtimes to exchange ideas and argue ardently about things until the very end of the meal. We did everything with great passion and engagement, and this often meant that the arguments would continue into the small hours. One thing I should like to emphasize here is this: in our discussions and conversations, in the prosecution of our studies, there was a soaring and enthusiastic commitment to research and investigation. This was certainly true with regard to the theoretical and speculative perspective, to specific theoretical choices and approaches, but there was a tremendously strong philological commitment involved too: for two or three years we would take a certain text, whether in the context of a seminar or in preparation for the examinations, and bore right into it until we reached that point of intellectual exhaustion and disorientation that was, so we had been taught, the very premise for understanding a text properly: the point at which the text has been utterly dismantled and dismembered marks the beginning of genuine comprehension.

*Iofrida:* Apart from this detachment from the political dimension, of which we have already spoken, are there any other particular characteristics that you would ascribe to the intellectual generation to which you belonged?
Gargani: Yes, I would also say that it represented the first cohesive group of philosophers to arrive at the Scuola Normale: Enrico de Angelis, who was in the same year as myself, had entered as a student of philosophy and graduated with a dissertation on the history of philosophy, and Paolo Cristofolini was in the same year too. We really were a cohesive group of philosophers. The seminar which I remember with the greatest pleasure is the one I conducted on that extraordinary text of Spinoza’s, De intellectus emendatione, and we worked on it in a very precise and analytical fashion. That is why I felt no real jolt at all when I moved on to study analytical philosophy.

Iofrida: This relationship between philological method and analytical philosophy is certainly not accidental: it seems an interesting point that is worth saying something more about.

Gargani: Within analytical philosophy too, of course, there was this very strong emphasis on the word, on the concept, this emphasis on “unpacking” concepts, as it were. Then again, at the Scuola Normale we also spent an enormous amount of time working on textual sources that did not directly concern us as philosophers at all: thus the course we followed, with Professor Bolelli, on the comparative history of the classical languages, was the same course that was followed by the classical philologists. This meant that we had to study two books of Homer, some Thucydides, two comedies of Terence, and two of Plautus, the De rerum natura of Lucretius, some Seneca – all for a single examination – and, finally, the Peregrinatio Aetheriae ad loca santa, which is a medieval text. But I have to say that these courses, typically taken by the linguists and the philologists, made a very fresh and lively impression on me precisely because they took us beyond the Latin of Cicero and allowed us to enjoy that of Plautus or of the Peregrinatio Aetheriae. This gave us a sense of Latin as something far more than a dead language, and enlivened the atmosphere of study as a result.

Iofrida: You were part of a group of vigorous and hardened philologists then ...

Gargani: Indeed. You only have to recall the names of those who were completing their studies around this time: there was Di Benedetto, there was Carlini, there was Salvatore Lilla who, in the same year as Ascheri and Carlini – was studying the Gnostics, writers such as Basilides and Valentinus, materials that he would continue to study at Oxford with Fränkel and Dodds. But in addition to the people I have specifically mentioned, the most decisive friendship and encounter for me was that with Giulio Lepschy. For, si parva licet
componere magnum, it reminds me of something Schoenberg said to Loos: “You have influenced more than you should!” I mean this in the sense that Lepschy, through his linguistic and knowledge and expertise, and through the fact that he had already had some experience of philosophy in Oxford, brought me the first real news of analytical philosophy, and encouraged me to read the two books by Warnock, *The Revolution in Philosophy* and *English Philosophy since 1900*. Although this movement may now be considered in Oxford circles with a certain ironic distance, it certainly imparted a very strong sense of innovation at the time. So there you have it: a great attachment to culture, to science, to philological scholarship. And then something that we all shared was an emphatically anti-Crocean mentality. In the cultural-historical context of those years, Croce was (quite unjustly, of course) a constant target, and above all, more than Croce himself, his followers and imitators; it seemed to us that Croce, and anyone who felt inspired by him, lacked any real sense of structure, any sense of analytical rigor or insight.

Iofrida: The rhetorical aspect of Croce’s thought and teaching …

Gargani: I mean the entire rhetoric of idealism – it was just so dispiriting to enter the lecture hall and hear someone declaring: the subject posits the object, the object is taken back into the subject, this same old litany …

Iofrida: If we may return for a moment to this emphasis on philology: it seems obvious to me that you do not regard this experience as having been in any way a waste of time – on the contrary, you still speak of it with considerable enthusiasm.

Gargani: This was a vital and important experience for me, and I must say that when I was at the *Scuola Normale* I felt dismayed at the prospect of the years ahead when I would no longer be studying there. For I had an acute sense of the educational process, of the way in which we develop day by day, advance in competence and understanding, and discover ever more fully the privilege of exploring and contributing to the world of culture and intellectual work. We were also in a situation in which at two o’clock in the morning a night owl like myself could run into De Giorgi, a mathematician with a truly outstanding scientific mind, and he would ask me: Is there some new philosopher who has launched some great new idea into the world? All this in a corridor of the *Scuola Normale Superiore*, in the Piazza dei Cavalieri, at two in the

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morning, with de Giorgi talking in that croaky voice of his, accompanied by constant tics and starts …

Iofrida: Do you think that this central role accorded to philology is still valid today?

Gargani: Yes, I do; I have to say that I cannot understand how on earth, *ceteris paribus*, the students of today are not obliged to follow the curriculum in Latin, or in history; we had also had seminars with Arsenio Frugoni, in medieval history, we did something on linguistics – these were all aspects that enriched us considerably, just as the attention to languages enriched us.

Iofrida: In the face of so many post-modern positions that maintain that all this is really finished, it seems significant that you should lay such emphasis on this point.

Gargani: I think, from what I can see, in this area as in others, in that of material culture, for example, that the standardizing, homogenizing, and technologically de-personalizing developments of our time are now accompanied by a strong desire to rediscover the concreteness of experience, by a nostalgia for a world of values that have recovered something of their authentic character, which is what I mean by concreteness here.

Iofrida: You are referring, I think, to certain aspects that are involved in the rediscovery and re-evaluation of craft and craftsmanship, something about which we hear a lot today.

Gargani: Craftsmanship is the right word here. Let us not forget that at the *Fiera dell’Antiquariato* in Milan, last year, there was as much interest and participation as there was at the *Fiera dello SMAU* (*Salone Macchine e Attrezzature per l’Ufficio*). This would suggest that the constant anticipation of the new is balanced, at least, by certain nostalgia for the traditional. And here I would like to permit myself a little digression on something that strikes me as rather important for a fuller understanding of this question: on one occasion, in Milan, I collaborated with a group of artists, managers, architects, and designers in an major project for redeveloping the area of the so-called *Fabbrica del Vapore*, the industrial zone of Carminati-Toselli where they used to manufacture locomotives. Our collective project, which I also drew up in writing, and was actually published,² originally envisaged that the Milan city council

Iofrida: Yet the line that actually prevailed in this connection was the easier and more regressive one.

Gargani: Yes, the line that would effectively take us backwards, whereas I believe that we were the ones genuinely looking to the future. The idea behind the Fabbrica del Vapore was precisely that of combining innovation with tradition, culture with enterprise, and this was something of a characteristic feature of Milan in the past, the tradition of Matteoli and La Banca Commerciale, of Grassi, for example. This tradition was effectively interrupted by the socialist administration of Craxi, and the developments of the 1980s, which actually extinguished the desire to envisage significant cultural alternatives for the future, and undermined the desire of the intellectuals and the people to come together and achieve something – not even the Second World War had managed to accomplish this. What we witnessed in Milan in the 1980s was the slow death of a culture. And yet, at the root of the initiative behind the Fabbrica del Vapore, there was this idea of uniting tradition and innovation, something to which I am profoundly committed, from the theoretical point of view as well: an idea that I derived principally from the thinkers and artists of the central European tradition, from Wittgenstein and Schoenberg, and others who belonged to the same current of thought, who discovered the new by reading the old in a new way, that is, from a perspective that is not avant-garde insofar it does not require a radical break with the languages and idioms of the past. On the contrary, it is a question of revisiting the tradition: Schoenberg found certain non-tonal affinities between the chords of traditional tonal music, yet he found them as possibilities which had always been avoided, or surrounded by false chords which struck him as functionally meaningless, and his sense of reality
drove him to break with tonality; yet these chords were in some sense pre-existent, and thus dodecaphonic music also embraces traditional tonal music within itself as a particular case. Einstein was to claim much the same thing with regard to Newtonian physics.

Iofrida: This is very reminiscent of the deconstructive approach of Derrida, for whom we do not construct on the basis of nothing; it is rather a matter of moving around the pieces, of displacing the moves of thought, although this displacement is by no means an insignificant procedure ...

Gargani: This is the interesting and important element of deconstructive thought, of post-modern culture generally, whereas the periodizing aspect that the term “post-modernism” suggests is certainly less convincing. For the rest, I think that Derrida himself repudiated the label “post-modern,” just as Rorty did, who prefers to speak of “re-contextualization,” which is something rather different.

Iofrida: After this digression – a merely apparent one since this more general discussion of tradition was prompted by the recognition of the value of certain pedagogic traditions that were practiced in the Scuola Normale during the 1950s – we should turn to your earliest studies: apart from Luigi Scaravelli, who I believe was not in a position to exercise any great influence on you at the time,3 your studies were strongly influenced by Francesco Barone, and then somewhat later, by Nicola Badaloni; after completing your thesis on G. E. Moore, which was also published, I believe that the most decisive experience for you was your time in Oxford and the teaching of Gilbert Ryle. In the main, it strikes me that even then you occupied a rather singular intellectual position that is difficult to encapsulate: on the one hand, along with an entire generation of intellectuals in the post-war period, you combined a repudiation of philosophical idealism with a sympathy for modern positivism, with an attraction for Anglophone culture, for its intellectual rigour, for the precision of science, etc.; on the other hand, with Badaloni, you opened yourself to the critical and historical approaches developed by the Marxist tradition – even though Marx as such never fully “captured” your interest, or so it seems to me.

Gargani: As for Barone, despite his young age, he was already a full professor when he arrived in Pisa.

3 In fact the philosopher Luigi Caravelli, who had taught at the University and the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, died in 1957.
*Iofrida:* We are talking about 1958 now?

*Gargani:* About the academic year 1958-59. Barone raised issues and questions that had been quite unheard of in the philosophical context of Pisa, in the idealist and Hegelian-Marxist tradition represented by Luporini and Badaloni. We were now introduced to the philosophy of science, formal logic, modern positivism. Barone was a teacher who spent a great deal of time discussing matters directly with the students. In addition to this orientation towards issues in science and logic, which meant that our courses involved not only Aristotle’s *Organon*, but also texts like Boole’s *An Investigation of the Laws of Thought* and the *Treatise on the Calculus* (and we studied these very seriously, including all the proofs), he also addressed more humanistic areas of thought. I remember that his fine book on Nicolai Hartmann provided an excellent introduction to these questions. He got us to study Hartmann’s *Ethics* in the original German (I translated the text together with De Angelis) along with Max Scheler’s *Formalism in Ethics and the Material Ethics of Values*. All in all, these particular choices represented a rather anti-idealist orientation, with an emphasis on the realist conception of values, on the problems of material ethics, etc. I have to say that Barone always evinced a very liberal and tolerant attitude, although he became rather rigid and conservative under the impact of the student movement. All these elements – the influence of Lepschy, of whom we spoke earlier, that of Barone, and so on – effectively came together to turn me in the general direction of analytical philosophy. Thus, when I was still a student, I started on the translation of Leibniz’s writings that Barone edited for Zanichelli, and then, after I had completed my thesis on the Cambridge School of philosophy, I went to Britain where I got to meet some outstanding figures such as Walzer (the great philologist who had edited the fragments of Heraclitus), Minio-Paluello, and then Gilbert Ryle, A. J. Ayer, and Brian McGuinness, who was my tutor. It was then that I began to work systematically on Wittgenstein. It was also precisely in this period that Giulio Lepschy had begun to teach in London, and our close discussions were thus able to continue unabated too.

I stayed in Oxford for just over a year, with my wife, and we had a son while I was there. Every week I would go to Queen’s College and present papers in which I would analyze various issues and problems in analytical philosophy, particularly in Wittgenstein, under the guidance of Brian McGuinness. This was a very rigorous exercise in which we would analyze passages from Wittgenstein and some of the relevant secondary literature. But at the same time I was also encouraged by various people, including Fränkel and McGuinness, to pursue other things too, for they would tell me: Spend a few hours studying Wittgenstein, and the rest of the time go and read...
Aristophanes, and Shakespeare, etc. They believed that one should also get to know and absorb a broad range of material culture. So while there was this great emphasis on analysis, there was also ample opportunity for exploring the world of culture. This was a very important year in my life. When I first arrived there I had the sense that I knew very little, and I felt very vulnerable and exposed, which was understandable in the light of all these impressive figures.

When I returned to Pisa from Oxford, I started to work on a rather more historical level: I wrote my first book on Wittgenstein,4 and some other essays on analytical philosophy; but I also felt a very strong interest in the history of philosophy generally, and for the classic texts in particular. And in this respect Badaloni and I were actually very close. It was from that I learned a genuine sense for historical methodology, for the intimate relations and connections that arise between the history of philosophy, the history of ideas, and the history of science. I remember that Badaloni’s first course, in which I collaborated as his assistant, covered the thought of Galileo, of Giordano Bruno, etc. This program of study was highly emblematic of the intimate connection between science, history, philosophical problems, and scientific problems, all of which were analyzed within the specific historical context. Something that was also extremely important for me, I should add here, was exposure to the work of Carl Augusto Viano, and the opportunity to engage in frequent and friendly discussions with him about these questions (I had first met Viano in Oxford at the home of Minio-Paluello). I have always been fascinated by his penetrating intelligence, by the decisive analytical power of his writings, by his philological-historical expertise and his mastery of logical procedures and of physico-mathematical theories. Certainly it is to Viano that I owe the particular approach adopted in my own historical research, or the idea of analyzing the philosophical tradition by means of specifically logico-analytic methods.


Iofrida: Between these years and 1971 your most important works are these two: the book on Wittgenstein, to which we have just alluded, and the book on Hobbes.5 They are both “academic” works, though only from a certain formal point of view, for they are actually very original in terms of content. Your book on Wittgenstein reveals an emphatic distance from all positivist formalism, from any idolatry of logic in general or of the *Tractatus* in particu-

lar (approaches from which many at the time, and indeed still today, never really succeeded in escaping); you take your bearings decisively from the later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, that is, from the concern with practices, from the constructivist approach, from the “manifold” rather than univocal idea of truth – the anti-positivist conception of truth that provides the guiding thread of all your work. On the other hand, as you have just indicated, your book also directly concerned the history of contemporary philosophy, in the sense that the theoretical interest here was filtered through active documentary research into the original sources, especially the Austrian sources, of Wittgenstein’s work. With the book on Hobbes, you applied the same approach to the 17th century and produced a kind of historical account that was then quite unknown in Italy: for you read Descartes, Hobbes, Grosseteste, and Gassendi from the perspective of contemporary concerns. In this sense, your approach to intellectual history only really has parallels and points of contact with certain developments in the French context. Perhaps I am mistaken, but I imagine that you were also inspired by the work of Alexandre Koyré in this regard?

Gargani: In the first place, I was interested in the historical dimension of thought, in the concrete plastic significance of the history of scientific and philosophical ideas, in the embeddedness of these ideas in history in the fullest sense of the word, and this methodological impulse, as I said, came from Badaloni, from a book like his study on Abbot Antonio Conti and the culture of the 16th and 17th centuries.6 Serious work on Hobbes and the development of science required investigation into the philosophy of the first half of the 17th century, but also, going even further back, into the work of Robert Grosseteste, for there was evidence that his own geometrical optics had exercised some influence on Hobbes. In particular, Crombie had claimed in his book on Grosseteste7 that the work of this thinker already contained all of the conditions for modern science as we recognize it from the great development of mechanics that transpired in the 17th century. And Grosseteste does appear remarkably significant in this regard: there is the application of geometrical optics to all aspects of physical reality, regarded as composed of particles of light, an idea that we encounter again in Galileo; there are highly advanced mathematical-theological reflections arguing that physical quantities are infinite, and therefore can only be grasped as such by God, and not by man who,

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given the intrinsic limitations of his mind, can only grasp these infinite realities in terms of finite quantities; and, finally, Grosseteste speaks of a hierarchy of infinites, or of infinites that are greater than other infinites. Of course, from my perspective as an analytical philosopher, I was particularly excited by these questions that touched at once on science and the history of philosophy, and I approached them less as a historian than as someone revisiting, as it were, thinkers like Grosseteste, Hobbes, and Galileo as precursors who had anticipated the program of analytical philosophy. My work plied back and forth, from analytical philosophy, and contemporary epistemology, back to those great scenes from the most glorious century of early modern philosophy, and forward from these philosophers, who helped through the secularization of thought to prepare the way for the modern scientific and historical outlook, to the conceptions and approaches of our own time. And I have to say that I still consider this to be an enormously important form of work today. There were various components that fed into this kind of research: certainly the contributions of Koyré, who combined an analytical reconstruction of scientific debates and discoveries, in the technical detail and precision required, with a comprehensive grasp of the fundamental underlying ideas. He knew how to bring out the broader significance and implications of those scientific discoveries for the culture of the time, for the age of Galileo and Newton itself, and also for the times to come: I should mention that Koyré significantly points out that it was in the 17th century that human beings started to explore the enigma of the universe as a means of exploring the enigma of themselves. Thus this remarkable century basically opens the way to what will eventually emerge, in the work of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, as the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” For it was at this time that we began to reflect upon, to investigate, to explore the singularity of human existence, the fact that the human being eludes the deterministic paradigms framed in terms of mechanics. It is this exceptionality, this singularity, of the human that would lead Jacques Monod to say that the human being, in the complex surrounding world so different from ourselves, resembles a nomad roaming the periphery of the universe. The power of Koyré’s work, in short, consisted not only in the way he reconstructed the great scientific discoveries of the past, but also in his reconstruction of the effects that these discoveries exercised upon culture in the broadest sense, and especially upon the image that human beings have developed of themselves. I should also mention here how much my investigations have also profited from the contributions of outstanding mathematicians like Hermann Weyl and L. E. J. Brouwer. For they clearly recognized, along with many other scientists, that there is an epistemology that is not simply a subsequent or a posteriori reflection on science itself, but one that is internal to the very structure of scientific theory. And this is the most fruitful and
exciting epistemology in which I am really interested, the epistemology that is implicit, for example, in the theory of relativity, even if Einstein himself never wrote anything on epistemology.

Iofrida: The epistemology that is implicit in the very practice of science – this has much broader philosophical implications, it seems to me …

Gargani: Yes, certainly, and in this specific sense: the investigation of the implicit is important, in philosophical and historical–critical reflection, where we are principally concerned not with the rules that guide our use of concepts, of the categories of intelligibility with regard to explicit phenomena, with the explicit rhetoric of scientific discourse, but rather with science as it is practiced. This is something implicit that must be rendered explicit. Here I would refer to the American philosopher Robert Brandom and his book *Making It Explicit*, which I believe is extremely important in this connection. I entirely endorse his desire to break the hold of the Platonizing self-interpretation of linguistic-conceptual rules that is characteristic of traditional epistemology, and his attempt to uncover the effective matrices, the processes that are actually involved in the elaboration of a scientific discovery, even in the context of our everyday linguistic usage. This is one of the most promising aspects, so it seems to me, for philosophical investigation in the future, and Robert Brandom is an acute interpreter of this development.

Iofrida: This also corresponds very closely to the position of a certain philosophical approach that emerged from the 1960s onwards, especially in France, defending the idea that it is necessary to ignore the conscious intentions of the author and emphatically attacking the Cartesian philosophy of the subject. It seems to me that your own investigations would coincide precisely with these very different currents of philosophical thought and with respect to which, especially at that time, you were pursuing your own ideas quite independently.

Gargani: I am very responsive to these aspects of French intellectual culture, even if I have never thematized them directly; I am responsive to what I would call the aspect of “unanticipatability,” to that process, of the greatest importance, that escapes our consciousness, but acts through the subject and lets it say what it lets it say: a subject that is no longer, as it were, the director behind the scenes, the demiurge presiding over the language that it deploys, but one which is immersed in a world and in a series of negotiations, of lin-

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guistic-conceptual interpretations. This also brings us, in a non-trivial sense, to the notion of truth as social consensus, to the notion of semantic categories as results of interpersonal and intersubjective negotiations in which the individual subject, from a certain point of view, is effectively dissolved. For my part, I endorse the anti-intentionalist perspective of Wittgenstein who claims, from the *Tractatus* onwards, with regard to so-called propositional attitudes: “a thinks that p,” or “a believes that p,” means nothing more than “p says that p,” that is, that the proposition simply repeats itself and we are merely a point of transition, as it were, for something that is greater than ourselves. For although I would not wish to say that language is “the house of Being,” which is a metaphysical-ontological hypostatization that holds no interest for me, it is quite true that language in a sense exceeds or transcends us.

*Iofrida*: In short, the category of conscious intentionality reveals its inadequacy in the face of so many different phenomena and problems.

*Gargani*: This is the ideological bias of humanism, the perspective from which Derrida was trying to free us in *Writing and Difference*. For my part, I have approached this question through the notion of the “friction of thought.”9 This signifies that there are processes that happen in unanticipated ways, that are not simply processes of intellectual elaboration, that represent, so to speak, historical transgressions. I would also speak of a causal process here, as long as we recognize that there is a non-naturalistic way of speaking about causality, in the sense that an event does not cause me to say certain things, but is truly the condition which permits me to elaborate new attitudes, new responses, new cultural dispositions. The basic problem with naturalism, with positivism, was the assumption that external causal action directly produces the elaboration of the original stimulus through the responses of the organism.

*Iofrida*: In a univocal fashion …

*Gargani*: Yes, in a univocal fashion, whereas, in my own view, our response is a modification of the causal action that excited our response. And that is why, in a certain sense, we never know the origin, the stimulus that stimulates, the response that responds. For the solution of a given problem is also a modification of the conditions of the problem itself. In this sense, therefore, I would also say that we should not think, in accordance with certain categorizations, and indeed with a powerful and authoritative ideological tradition, that there is a

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structure that then gives rise to the superstructure; I would say, on the contrary, that there are forms of life in which all these elements, all these factors, transpire together, so that we cannot claim that thought essentially mirrors some more fundamental underlying structure or basis that is just waiting to be discovered. On the contrary, our thought, our processes of conceptualization, our symbolic activities transpire together with the structured events themselves.

Iofrida: In this sense we could refer to the category of “occasion.”

Gargani: Yes, we could speak of occasion and “occasionalism” in the sense of things that coincide with one another, that transpire together, as I put it. And this would also help to clarify the enigmatic and mysterious feeling that assails us when we ask: given a certain situation, how on earth does a work of art, a piece of music, or a philosophical text possibly succeed in capturing, or mirroring, that situation? But there is no mirroring: these things have emerged together, as if there were some unknown matrix that produces and brings them to pass together, in a process of concomitance. I have repeatedly emphasized this point in various writings: namely the idea that the elements of a process, or of a historical situation, do not occur together in accordance with a nexus of implications of the sort “if there is x, then there is y,” “if there is one thing, then there is the other.” It is more a question of: “where one thing exists together with another, one thing yields another.”

Iofrida: As if there were some kind of musical relationship between the terms here.

Gargani: It is very interesting that you use the expression “musical” in this context, for this reminds me of Wittgenstein who said that when he read the *Principia Mathematica* of Russell and Whitehead, these three volumes that have long represented the Bible of contemporary logic, it was rather like following a piece of music, like following a melody. I imagine that you alluded to “music” because we are not talking about a mechanical relation of cause and effect here, but suggesting a harmonic model where things coexist with one another, where things are motivically connected with one another (aesthetics) or motivationally connected with one another (ethics).

Iofrida: Yes, and in the same sense we could also speak of a constellation of aspects.

Gargani: Of a constellation, yes. And this also reminds me of Proust’s “In the Shadow of a Young Girl in Flower.” Speaking of the word “Balbec,” he tells
us that the first open syllable invokes the surging waves of the sea in Brittany, while the second one, dry and short, invokes the steep spires of a Gothic cathedral. The word embraces these elements, like a cloister, in their togetherness.

Iofrida: What you have just said, it seems to me, reveals one of the most fundamental points of your work: the impulse to go beyond the positions of positivism, but without appealing to any simple immediacy. On the contrary, your approach implies a complexity, an analytic perspicacity, a continual re-examination of scientific paradigms, rather than any simple rejection of the latter. For it is the scientific paradigms themselves that demand this approach.

Gargani: In effect, it is a question of pursuing a process of complex and continual mediation, a labor that involves the rejection of immediacy, of that notion of the “immediately given” that Sellars, Rorty, and Brandom have subjected to critical revision. When we think of immediacy, we tend to think exclusively of vitalistic philosophies, but there is also a form of immediacy in other areas, quite independent of “life philosophy,” that sometimes involves adopting concepts in their immediacy, as if they had no history. In this connection I would specifically mention two interesting British anthropologists, John Law and Robert Cooper, who speak of a “distal rationality” that they identify with the traditional and metaphysical notion of rationality, one that privileges pre-defined, spontaneous, or transcendental concepts, as we might describe them in Kantian terms, concepts that operate with the rigid dichotomies of “internal” and “external,” “subject” and “object,” “mind” and “nature.” These concepts are essentially pre-constituted, concocted in advance like “fast food,” whereas the real task is to uncover the practical matrix through which all these concepts, and the concept of rationality itself, have ultimately been produced. Without wishing to endorse his claims in their entirety, I believe this is what Marvin Minsky means when he says that the concept of rationality, of the mind, is not a spontaneous notion, but rather an enormously complex “society” of attempts, of hypotheses, of trials, of errors, of dispositions, of accommodations, of breaks and inhibitions that we have learned and acquired in the course of life, in the very flux, here too, of a historical and cultural-historical process of mediation.

Iofrida: This critique of immediacy, of the myth of immediate intuition, brings us back again to the question of philological practice.

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Yes, it does, for we are still talking about a practice of evaluating things, from various points of view. I am not a relativist, but I maintain that we have long been obsessed with a concept of truth as essentially permanent and trans-historical in character, as something withdrawn and protected, as it were, from the turbulence of space and time. I claim on the contrary, along with Rorty and Davidson, that “true” is a primitive rather than theoretical predicate, one that must therefore be specified in relation to the historical contexts, to the cultural contexts, to the linguistic communities, to the “audiences” with regard to which the term is applied. Echoing the views of certain philosophers, but also of outstanding poets such as Wallace Stevens, of whom I have spoken in my recent book, *Il filtro creativo*, I think that we have been obsessed by the idea of truth conceived as adequation, as correspondence, as a passive reflection of the real. I also believe that the idea of truth as correspondence is intimately bound up, from a philosophical point of view, with a certain assumption, a primitive scene, that is religious in character, one that says: “God speaks to man.” This metaphorical conception, in the course of secularization, then becomes: “Nature speaks to man,” or again: “the Psyche speaks to man.” Now I maintain that nature does not speak to human beings, that the psyche does not speak to human beings, but that we ourselves bring these structures, these things, to speak within our forms of language. As Nelson Goodman points out, if we look closely, we see that the scientist does not seek truth or the true, but tests a hypothesis, puts it to the trial of experience, evaluates it by reference to its predictive power, its coherence, its economy, its utility, and also to certain aesthetic criteria, like simplicity, that have sometimes helped to privilege one theory at the expense of another when there is no decisive empirical evidence or confirmation one way or the other. This was certainly the case with the theory of relativity in its early years, but this also holds for the Copernican theory before it. In short, therefore, the truth is a primitive term, as it were, which is then unfolded into this whole series of features and properties.

4. The Book that Disappeared

Iofrida: We have thereby already introduced some of the fundamental themes of your current work, but they were already decisively embodied in your book *Knowledge without Foundations*. This was the first work in which you appeared as a philosopher with a distinctive voice of your own. Let us there-

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fore retrace our steps a little to the moment when this book was published. We are therefore back in 1975, a very significant and particular moment from the politico-historical point of view. The book was still addressed, even if not exclusively, to thinkers and intellectuals of a Marxist persuasion, and proposed a profound change of paradigm: you contrasted the outlook of “guaranteed” historicism, the notion of historical laws of development, the idea of a basic foundation, with the very perspective you have just articulated – with a constructivist position that was influenced by the teachings of both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. In this respect, you were defending an approach that was consonant, albeit in your own particular way, with a specific cultural tendency also manifest at an international intellectual level: the rediscovery of Heidegger, the development of post-structuralism in France, the critical voices such as Kuhn and Feyerabend that had emerged in the context of British and American epistemology. At the same time, in the “historical” sections of your book – in the discussions of Descartes and Newton – it seems to me that you were summing up the fruits of your earlier experience, but also bringing everything to an entirely new issue: epistemology, the history of science, the history of philosophy itself were leading you to a position that would also radically question the role and significance of everything that went before.

Gargani: First of all, I would like to say something about the vicissitudes of this particular book. I wrote Knowledge without Foundations in a very short time, and with considerable enthusiasm, but for me it was a book just waiting inside me to be written. It was like rediscovering – in a dimension that is neither purely historical nor purely theoretical, but historical-critical in character – all those elements of historical experience that I had garnered up to that point, in relation to the issues we have mentioned, and reinterpreting them theoretically. It permitted me to fuse these aspects together in order to encapsulate various theses: the rejection of foundational knowledge, the repudiation of any ahistorical and atemporal basis for knowledge, the notion of a constructivist and performative matrix of knowing, once again in the context of a critical-polemical treatment the correspondence theory of truth. The traditional philosopher would asked himself: what objects am I indicating with these propositions?, or: how do these propositions succeed in referring to objects at all? From the perspective of the constructive approach, we must answer in the following way: objects are known and identified insofar I utter an assertion in which I constitute them performatively. In the same sense I would say that there is no understanding of a proposition until there is a proposition to be understood. This is precisely the aspect in which, from Knowledge without Foundations onwards, I have attempted to challenge what
seems to me the traditional methodology that is based on a duplex logic, a logic of duplication, as when Frege says that a straight line exists before it is drawn, or when Dedekind says that in the number series there exist infinitely many irrational decimals in the intervals between the integers. These thinkers, along with many others, such as Cantor for example, who are undoubtedly truly great pioneers of modern logic and mathematics, nonetheless always envisaged some such scene of duplication, of some primordial state where entities already existed as such, whereas in my own view of the matter, they are born with the act in which they are constructed. In short, I want to argue that the recognition of such entities is not a passive mirroring. The recognition of a certain signification, of an utterance, is an operation which serves precisely to complete and effect them.

I must say that this book, *Knowledge without Foundations*, which was quite widely read, also met with a fractious and difficult reception, in the sense that even colleagues who were very close to me distrusted the work, or even thought it downright dangerous. For months the book effectively disappeared in the premises of the publishing house that was supposed to bring it out, no one seemed to know what was happening with it, and there were differing views about its prospects. I once presented the general argument of the book at the *Istituto Gramsci* in Rome, and I was almost ridiculed. I remember claiming that there are a variety of paradigms that permit us to describe reality: we can therefore, so I argued, stop employing the category of thing or object, for we can describe a couch, for example, as a common sense object in terms of ordinary language, but we can also describe it in terms of a system of equations without employing any ontological categories; and I remember Cesare Luporini complaining that we had surely been using the category of object for centuries! I was attacked, even mocked, but when the book was eventually published it aroused considerable interest.

Iofrida: So you are referring to discussions that took place before the publication of the book?

Gargani: Yes, there was a presentation of the book in advance of the publication; in the publishing house no one could lay their hands on it because someone had been asked to produce a report on the volume, but had apparently dismissed it and counseled against publication. But in the end they did decide to publish it (after a direct intervention by Giulio Einaudi who always had a keen nose for new books), but only after many twists and turns. And in fact much the same happened with the book *The Crisis of Reason.*

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Iofrida: … a book that represents a first step in applying the program you had outlined in *Knowledge without Foundations*: on the basis of the theses you had presented, you encouraged an express debate on these issues with a group of intellectuals who were active in different fields and disciplines (history, linguistics, and literature), but who all belonged to the Left (in the broad sense) and who were all interested in moving beyond the old intellectual schemes and frameworks. And certainly, when we look back on it from today, the list of authors involved may provoke considerable surprise since it includes some who have radically changed their position since. But the volume effectively marked out the horizon of debate for years to come, along with the collection of essays, *Weak Thought*, that was brought out by Vattimo and Rovatti a little later.\(^{15}\) Apart from describing the fortunes of your own volume, I would be grateful if you could clarify one specific point. Your thought converged to some extent with the positions defended in *Weak Thought* and there are certainly some notable affinities between both approaches – that of *The Crisis of Reason* and that of *Weak Thought*. And in fact they contracted a kind of victorious alliance that exercised a certain intellectual hegemony over Italian culture for fifteen years or more. Yet it seems to me that your intellectual approach has had a specific identity of its own from the start: in that period in particular, you were certainly a long way from Heidegger (and although you have subsequently come rather closer to his thought, you have always made use of it on the basis of other considerations, as it were, without ever accepting his fundamental perspective). And then again, you came from an intellectual tradition that prized rigor and precision – from analytical philosophy, and Wittgenstein etc. – and were also influenced by a secular-Marxist line of thought, whereas Vattimo effectively developed, in a very intelligent and creative way, a tradition of idealistic and spiritualistic thought associated with someone like Pareyson (and I know that you have always been a ferocious critic of the Italian tradition of “spiritual” thought). Do you think that these differences were particularly important? And do you think that your own approach has been assimilated rather too quickly to that of Vattimo?

Gargani: As far as the fortunes of this book are concerned, I remember meeting a colleague in Pisa who said: “It’s a shame, Gargani, but I would never have believed that you could do something like this!” The “crisis of reason” of which I was speaking seems to have struck many simply as a hymn to irrationalism. I also remember Sebastiano Timpanaro who constantly reproached me for attempting to dismantle the foundations of knowledge, which he did

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in a cordial enough way, but also with considerable moral and cultural disdai
, as if I were an intellectually corrupting influence. In reality, *The Crisis of Reason* is a book that just came out as it came out, and it certainly includes some very fine essays, such as the one by Carlo Ginzburg, which is a text that inaugurated the specific historical methodology of “microhistory.” But irrespective of how we judge the resulting book, I was amazed, and indeed very disappointed, with regard to the underlying assumptions of the ensuing debate. I mean that in a period like the end of the 1970s, when intellectuals who were strongly involved in civil and political life were constantly voicing the need to rethink our theoretical methodologies, I had expected a very different response. But when it came to the issue, many of these same intellectuals withdrew from the challenge, or simply marched on past it. Thus I could mention Asor Rosa, as one example that can stand for many. Rosa was present at the debate at Einaudi when my book was introduced and discussed, as I had myself proposed. His response typified the hesitation, to put it no more strongly or vehemently, that is frequently encountered amongst Italian intellectuals. They are fond of making grand ideological pronouncements, but when it comes to addressing a particular situation, questioning a tradition, or rethinking the past, they tend to hesitate and prefer to entrust themselves to more familiar, and more compromised, approaches instead.

For its part, *The Crisis of Reason* was primarily intended to present and document new approaches that would allow us to rethink the character of rationality, of human symbolic processes generally. Thus this “crisis of reason” was not meant to imply a crisis of thought itself, of intellectual coherence and consistency; it was an attempt to reclaim these properties of coherence and consistency in our thought and discourse through fresh analyses that also permitted a more realistic understanding of our actual procedures of enquiry and investigation. Thus, in reality, we were talking about a “crisis” in the sense that reason had become increasingly complex in relation to new questions, as had already happened at the start of the last century and has also happened at the beginning of our own. In this sense the book strikes me as very different, in terms of the field it covers and the prospects it develops, from the volume *Weak Thought*. There is, it seems to me, a degree of convergence in some respects, in the sense that a thorough critical revision of certain orthodoxies in epistemology, philosophy, and mathematics, as traditionally interpreted, can naturally find some point of contact with this regime of “weakened thought,” as the authors of the book described it. But the models and paradigms to which *The Crisis of Reason* refers offer us conceptual resources that are no less rigorous, are no less “strong,” than those challenged by the new paradigms of weak thought, and in this sense the two books are fairly remote from one another and emerge from very different cultural sources and perspectives. Then again,
Weak Thought also reflects a certain way of “periodizing” philosophical culture. Vattimo in particular, it seems to me, is very interested in a philosophy of history where philosophy plays the decisive role, as Heidegger also maintained. But we can surely, following Rorty, reproach Heidegger for thinking that nothing but philosophical texts have essentially been produced between the Enlightenment and the present day – as if no scientific discoveries had been made, as if no novels had been written, as if there had been no French Revolution, in short, as if there had not been a richer and much more complex constellation of factors and elements at work. We must therefore accuse him of having ultimately confused the fate of the West with the fate of philosophy.

Iofrida: This clarification is particularly important, for there is little clarity, at the level of general opinion, concerning these significant differences that define the identity of your philosophical approach in relation to that of Vattimo. And I am gratified, in particular, to see that here too you emphasize your commitment to scientific knowledge, something which rather confirms the fundamental continuity of your general intellectual development. But I think that there is also something else here: your position implies, it seems to me, an emphatic attention to the real, to the extra-philosophical context, which Heideggerianism, and not only this particular current of philosophical thought, tends to minimize or ignore.

Gargani: The characteristic feature of “weak thought” is that it remains a philosophical strategy, a way of escaping from a series of difficulties by organizing a certain strategy. But The Crisis of Reason was not concerned with organizing a strategy, and made absolutely no effort in this direction. It was an attempt to show the need for an aggiornamento, if I may use a very ordinary Italian word here, the need to “bring things up to date” with regard to our understanding of science and rationality. I have a strong attraction to literature and poetry, and for what is worth I am not what one would call a “naturalist” in philosophy, but it is quite impossible to reflect seriously on contemporary culture without thinking about the scientific culture that is one of its essential components. In fact, there is no doubt that models and paradigms from science have penetrated the fields of literature, philosophical discourse, and epistemology, and exercised a significant influence there, not in any simple mechanical way but by a process of diffusion and osmosis. If Beckett relates an event under the aegis of different, and alternative, perspectives, this certainly reflects an interest in the concept of “sum-over-stories;” this allows us the possibility of composing different versions of the same event. But we are also talking about an idea that has entered our cultural imaginary from the field of electrodynamics and quantum theory through the work of Einstein, Richard Feynman, Stephen
Hawking etc. Scientific investigation has shown that we can provide alternative interpretations for certain phenomena, now in terms of particles, now in terms of waves. The idea of a regime of alternative truths, in accordance with different circumstances, with different possibilities for a more productive line of enquiry, is one that has been introduced by the natural sciences. We would never have witnessed the flowering of the most innovative and audacious forms of epistemology associated with the names of Kuhn, Feyerabend, and others, different from one another as they are, without this revolution which in the first instance transpired in what we may call the scientific imaginary. And it is possible to suggest a certain relationship between Picasso’s painting *Les demoiselles de Avignon* and the theory of relativity, both of them accomplished within two years of one another, for in the sense we have already discussed in another connection, we are not dealing with one-way causal determination here, but rather with a process in which things come to birth and flourish together.

*Iofrida*: A “correspondence” …

*Gargani*: Yes, a kind of syntony, a *correspondance*, in the French sense: we can thus be surprised to find there are certain affinities and similarities between the painting of Picasso’s and the scientific approach that led to the discovery of regional time in physics. But in fact our imagination has been enriched even more by the effects of scientific discoveries than it has by literary innovations.

*Iofrida*: And we might add Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* to the painting by Picasso in this regard.

*Gargani*: Yes, because here too there is an idea of regional time, of an identity that is built up through processes of re-description and re-construction; and the idea of different time frames, and the relations between them, might help us, in the context of this new scientific approach, to heal the dichotomy that Koyré and others have defined as the drama of modern man: the dichotomy between the two cultures, the scientific and the humanistic cultures. In this sense it seems especially significant to me that Prygogine has described science as an experimental dialogue with nature, and scientific investigation as a poetical listening to nature. I am always particularly irritated when people observe a certain metaphorical dimension or literary component in my texts and then conclude that I have somehow abandoned philosophy.

*Iofrida*: I am happy to hear you say this, for it is a confusion that one often encounters in discussions of your work.
This can easily happen when one is no longer directly engaged in academic life or professional research. In fact I have continued to write philosophical essays, sometimes of a rather technical kind. But above all – and we have spoken of music earlier – this hybridization of codes is a symptom of the cultural turn of our era, perhaps the most interesting feature of our culture, in the midst of so many other disturbing things that are happening. This reshuffling of the cards, or hybridization of different symbolic codes, is revealed when we discover an affinity between the psychoanalytic practice that dreads and explores the cry of madness and that which also listens for the poetry that can be heard in the unconscious, when we recognize the role that certain metaphorical elements can play in decisive moments of scientific paradigm change. It is quite true that “normal science,” as Kuhn has explained, has no need for such metaphorical formulations, nor for the constant re-justifications in the rather improbable sense required by Popper, a picture that does not reflect scientific research as it is practiced and which scientists themselves would find it hard to recognize. But when a certain paradigm enters into crisis, arrives at a crucial turning point, scientific theories begin to assume metaphorical features. Newtonian theory teems with metaphors of one kind or another: space and time as the *sensorium Dei*, the notion of divine intervention to provide energy for the system of central forces that would otherwise tend toward a state of equilibrium and thereby bring about the death of the universe itself. But the flourishing of electromagnetic theory, too, was accompanied by the metaphor of the “ether,” this highly enigmatic element more subtle than air: in short, these great scientific turning points typically involve features we would describe as figurative and metaphorical in character, just as we have also recognized, though only relatively recently, the cognitive features that are operative in aesthetic works. In this respect I feel that some philosophers still cling to obsolete and indefensible models, like Putnam, for example, who claims that we cannot really speak of knowledge in relation to art or literature since knowledge proper can only result from repeatable and controllable practices in accordance with well-established procedures. But in reality there are cognitive and reflective components in art and in literature too. I recall that when I was in Berlin, Luigi Nono once made an extremely significant remark to me, an observation as simple as it was illuminating: “Making music, for me, is a mode of thinking, a mode of knowing.”

5. Literature and the Re-emergence of Childhood

Iofrida: This seems to be the appropriate moment to talk about your engagement with literature. In your published writings, this engagement appears
to emerge rather gradually, in a series of steps, but before we address this directly, I should like to ask when your own first literary efforts effectively began. Were you already writing novels or stories at the time when you only published philosophical essays, or did this start even earlier? Did you sense some kind of literary vocation right from the beginning, and if not, when did it actually develop?

Gargani: The question regarding literature is, in one sense, very close to me, but it is also a rather difficult and complex one. I do not want to adopt an official line by attempting to reconcile and recompose these heterogeneous elements in retrospect; yet at the same time I do not want to fall into merely individual biographical reflections that can hold little interest for others, and above all for you. In short, I do not wish to mediate and reconcile everything in my response to this question. I would prefer to leave a little opacity here, the sense that not everything is significant, that there is no final synthesis. Can I just say that there have been certain elements of contingency here, or is that perhaps inappropriate for a philosophical journal?

Iofrida: It is perfectly appropriate, and what you say rather surprises me, albeit in a positive sense. I realize that I myself have tended to interpret your intellectual development in a rather logical-deductive fashion, whereas we are talking about experiences here.

Gargani: You ask if I had written any literary texts before those works of mine which effectively contain a strong narrative element, such as *Sguardo e destino* or *L'altra storia*. In fact in the early 1980s I had already published a number of stories in the journal *Alfabeta*, a publication that is very dear to me, and run by friends to whom I owe a great deal. The journal strongly appealed to me because, as a project, it rather reminded me of the *Nuovo Politecnico*, with its desire to contribute to a highly complex range of issues, its courageous and open-minded interventions, and its interest in providing a substantial amount of information and illustration for the reader.

Iofrida: So you did not write any early novels or poetry in your youth?

Gargani: No, I have never written any poetry. I did write some stories at that time, but previously, rightly or wrongly, I had rather repressed a tendency that, to tell the truth, I had always sensed within me. For, from time to time, I felt the temptation to relate, to recast in narrative form, certain events that might otherwise be described in a more standard code or language. I would sometimes, for a variety of reasons, feel a desire to recount the character of
a conference, for example. Thus a conference typically involved the papers that were delivered, the discussions that ensued, perhaps the proceedings that were subsequently published, and so on, but there was also a physical, perceptual, and affective context to the encounter between these particular people which never got described, or was effectively marginalized. And there were occasions when I became particularly interested in this margin, and sometimes I would feel this way in other circumstances too, for obviously I did not spend all my time at academic conferences. There were other situations, and sometimes the most commonplace situations, that called from within me for some form of narration. What does “narration” mean here? It means recovering the significance of an event, of a situation, of individual acts and forms of behavior, moods and states of mind, not in the medium of standard codes, of ordinary or institutionalized language, but in a metaphorized language – a language animated by unexpected and unanticipated conjunctions of words and metaphors, and concepts, that break with standard linguistic codes, that are also marked, it may be, by a certain musical character or cadence. In this sense, the encounter with the work of Thomas Bernhardt, in the mid 1980s, has proved decisive for me. I subsequently became a close student of his writings, for here I discovered a kind of musical paradigm that is elaborated precisely through a conscious and deliberate system of variations on a theme. I was reminded of Schubert rather than Beethoven as the musical model here, for Bernhardt’s system of variations is pursued obsessively around a theme that is resumed, revisited, explored, and exhausted, that is carried to its most extreme and contradictory consequences. I mention Schubert rather than Beethoven in this connection because there is no idea of developing the themes in an entirely organic way here.

Iofrida: So we are addressing the theme of “repetition.”

Gargani: Yes, a repetition that resembles a spiraling movement, that turns constantly around the same theme, but reveals different facets of it each time. In Bernhardt I found a grammar, as it were, in which my hopes and expectations, my propensity for narrative, could unfold and express themselves. In this sense some specific culturally mediated circumstances have been relevant, but there have also been contingencies here, the sort of things that I sometimes describe as the “frictions of thought.” Something transpires, there is some motivating act, so to speak, some determination deriving from particular events, from a particular history, and this prompts us to recount or narrate. On the one hand there was already this disposition, as it were, to provide a narrative version for events, for a history, and on the other hand there was a certain contingency, a genuinely occasioning factor: I found myself in Berlin
for one year, specifically between 1986 and 1987, at the Wissenschaftskolleg where I was engaged in philosophical research, along with Richard Rorty, who spent the same year there with me, and along with about thirty other colleagues from the most varied of disciplines, from physics to psychology, mathematics, and the information sciences. In this context, the idea of “narrating” signifies, on the hand, a literary practice of writing, of recounting something in narrative form, but also, on the other, I should emphasize, a way of inflecting or modulating the theme of the narration in other versions that are closer perhaps to the concerns of my own profession. I am referring to the way in which we should also acknowledge the narrative element that is involved in the history of philosophy, and recognize the history of philosophy itself as narrative. And this did not mean interpreting the history of philosophy by the standards of specifically aesthetic works, but rather suggested re-reading philosophical works as texts that recount the particular relations that philosophers, and groups of philosophers, have entertained with their own contemporaries or with their predecessors. In this sense, I would consider, let us say, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* in specific contrast to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*; and likewise I would also consider the role of narrative in the scientific field – the aspect that doesn’t appear in the manuals and textbooks, for when we read texts of this kind we are not actually practicing serious science, not actively pursuing experimental scientific investigation. We find ourselves confronted here by texts, in my view, that conceal the actual practice of science: the manuals efface the genuine text of scientific investigation which, as Gerard Holton has strikingly demonstrated, transpires through a much more precarious process that requires, obviously, specific tests and experiments, but also involves conversation and discussion. We only have to consider, for example, the protocols that led Millikan to his discoveries regarding the properties of electrons, where it was precisely the discussions surrounding the experimental aspects that played such a central role for everyone involved. Thus all these elements in my own personal and cultural experience helped to propel me toward the practice of narrative as I have described it. I must also say that I received a very strong impetus in this direction, a strong encouragement to pursue this approach even further, from the Wissenschaftskolleg that I have already mentioned. I recall a wonderful seminar under Wolf Lepenies, the sociologist of culture, in this connection. Although Lepenies was the Rector, he was also active in scholarly and scientific research and worked with the rest of us, as one of us, on the particularly interesting and brilliant idea of a “fund of ideas.” To understand what this means, one may think of atom-

ism here: a conception that emerges five or six centuries before Christ, then falls into neglect, re-emerges only many centuries later, and falls again into neglect with the discovery of electromagnetism; or we may think of the idea of the unconscious, for example, which appears in Leibniz, then has to wait for Eduard von Hartmann to re-emerge as such, is eclipsed once again, and is then brought into the forefront of attention by Freud …

Iofrida: This also makes one think of Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances.”

Gargani: Yes, indeed, in the sense of a theme or concept that possesses no fixed status or essential definition, but is rather distributed through a variety of modulations that present affinities to some other constellation of concepts, that exhibit a differential array of connections that do not imply one any single essential property amongst the members of this class, but rather a nexus of relations that link these various members with one another under different aspects, and thus give rise to family resemblances. Well, arguing on the basis of his concept of a “fund of ideas,” Lepenies informed us that, in his professional work as a sociologist, he had found himself increasingly drawn to the question of narrative. Thus during my stay in Berlin I was stimulated and encouraged in all these different ways. I should mention Rorty’s name here too, for he also developed his own view of the importance of narration, understood in terms of his intersubjective and consensus-oriented interpretation of semantic categories, of argument as a form of negotiation. From this perspective, meaning and truth lie neither in myself nor in the interlocutor who confronts me, neither in me nor in you, for they transpire in the middle, they occur between us. And then again, the specific thing that drew me towards literature was the fact that I also experienced moments of suspended perception, as it were, of a rather ecstatic perception, something to which Berlin itself contributed in no small degree. For this city already seemed to enjoy a rather unreal or imaginary existence – in the sense that it was a city that was externally sustained and financed in a highly artificial way, a symbol of the “West” in contrast with the “Eastern Block.” And this imaginary and extraordinarily poetical atmosphere in which the city lived, which lent it the signs rather than the realities of city life, could itself be felt and perceived. There were the advertisements and billboards of the major firms and leading businesses, but the businesses themselves of course were all located elsewhere. Young people in Berlin enjoyed highly subsidized fares on trains and planes, and if they chose to reside in Berlin for a period of time, they would also be exempted from military service. It was thus a city that was basically sustained by a certain perceptual and affective perspective, one replete with spaces, possibilities, enigmas. I remember that I often
liked to stroll in front of the Brandenburgh Gate; I would mount the platform
that the Allied Powers had erected to overlook the Berlin wall, thus affording a
glimpse of a poor, degraded, somewhat squalid East Berlin: the copious barbed
wire, the *Volkspolizei* constantly patrolling the entire border of the divided
city, the cars patched up with different colored bits of metal, the pervasive
sense of grayness, of bureaucracy, of a certain melancholy. And in immediate
contrast with this, on the other side, there were the potent signs and symbols
of the West, of the DKW,\(^\text{17}\) and so on. But in the border zone dividing the
city, precisely because it was just a border zone, was still littered with ruins,
remains, and rubble, and of course this all reminded me — since I was now in
Germany and had once witnessed German soldiers occupying Genoa — of the
city of my birth, of the war, of the terrifying years of the German occupation,
particularly after 8 September …

*Iofrida*: You must have been nine or ten years old at the time …

*Gargani*: Yes, I have very vivid memories of this, especially of the German
troops who, at the time of the aerial bombardments that carried on every day
for months on end, would come into the tunnels in Genoa where the people
used to shelter, and deport all the able-bodied men that they could find. All of
this took me right back to my childhood. And then, standing on this platform
in Berlin, I looked around me, and I remember one thing in particular: the
light was particularly clear that day, it was in November, but the sky was unusual-
ly bright. I looked about me, and I had the distinct impression of looking
at things as I had once been looked at myself, or indeed, as if I were gazing
with the gaze of someone who was familiar to me, and I naturally associated
this gaze with my father, without explicitly thinking of him at all. I did not
think, either then or later, about any particular event, occasion, or biographi-
cal detail, or of the face of my father; there was simply a way of looking, one
which had somehow already involved me since my youth: I was looking at
things as I had once been looked at, and I recognized that gaze, that way of
looking, even though it was not just my own. I descended from the platform,
and began to think in a rather different way than I had before...

*Iofrida*: Can you describe in what sense?

*Gargani*: In the sense that I was no longer so keen to rush to conclusions, to
force all these meanings together immediately, to tie them all up in a clearly
defined and coherent way. I was ready to allow these thoughts to float

\(^{17}\) The initials stand for “Deutsches Kaufhaus des Westens.”
around in my mind, to let them communicate and cross-fertilize with one another as they came to me. There were two sources of solace and encouragement for me here, one textual and one personal. At this very moment I was invited by Vito Laterza to prepare an Italian edition of Wittgenstein’s “secret diaries,” where he basically describes his time as an enlisted soldier, his personal circumstances and existential concerns, his search for the word that redeems (das erlösende Wort) and the thought that redeems (der erlösende Gedanke). Wittgenstein was describing certain moments of a profound ethical quest that would lead him to a more authentic form of speech, a more authentic form of writing. I seized this occasion as an opportunity to explore and expose all the ethical, existential, and in some sense religious, components of Wittgenstein’s work. Although he never subscribed to any specific creed, or any Church, there is absolutely no doubt that he was deeply concerned with ethico-religious questions, and the expressions I have just cited – the word that redeems, the thought that redeems – are of course ones that are commonly encountered in the field of theology. And I recalled Wittgenstein’s claim that an individual who finds it too distressing to descend within himself will also be compelled to remain on the surface, even when it comes to writing. As he once wrote to his friend the architect Paul Engelmann: “I have become a better human being in the sense that I have recognized my profound moral inadequacy.” According to Wittgenstein, this dynamic ethical impulse was even a condition for being a good logician. Thus I tried to reveal, also beyond the overt limits of Wittgenstein’s text, the ethical approach behind his work, and I specifically undertook to show that there is indeed a strong connection between ethics and logic in his thought. And I would point out, en passant, for those who may not be aware of this, that in the Tractatus logic is the horizon for all the possibilities of the thinkable, while ethics involves the acceptance of the world in its entirety, not the acceptance of this or that event, of this or that fact: the person of good will (guten Wollens), the person who is decent (anständig), is someone who accepts the world in its entirety, and thus there is also a connection between logic and ethics precisely because both consider the world sub specie aeternitatis. Thus in my “Preface” to this edition – a text of mine to which I was and remain deeply committed – I tried to show how Wittgenstein’s “depth grammar” (Tiefengrammatik) can also be called “deep” in the sense that it undertakes to discover what language effectively is, beyond the deceptive and illusory surface of linguistic forms that we ordinarily employ. Naturally, this approach disturbed those who we might call “official thinkers,” like Armando De Palma, for example, who wrote

an incredible review that was basically a string of insults. Since I had been discussing an aspect of Wittgenstein that is so well documented that it can be amply supported and substantiated by Wittgenstein’s own remarks and his published thoughts, I frankly had the impression that I had touched a sensitive nerve on the part of those “academized” individuals who try to domesticate the authors to whom they are very strongly attracted, for the superego commands them to repress and contain this attraction. In this way they transform Nietzsche into Spinoza, or Wittgenstein into Carnap, that is, reduce such thinkers to the limited terms that they themselves can bear.

Iofrida: May I interrupt for a moment simply to draw your attention to one point in particular? It is clearly true that your interest in literature has recently opened up new ground, but for you it has also involved a certain rediscovery, in the authors most dear to you, of certain aspects that you had left somewhat in the shade before, that you had not explicitly discussed up to that point.

Gargani: Yes, this is quite true; the situation was like this: I had published my first book on Wittgenstein twenty years before, and now it felt as if I were revisiting the subject, and discovering the new by means of the old. Thus, to return to what I was saying before, there was this specific textual episode, the rediscovery of Wittgenstein’s diaries at the suggestion of Laterza, and this coincided with my exposure to the work of Bernhardt, namely a form of writing that undoubtedly represents an act of freedom and courage – the idea of not simply cheating us with words, and thus of exercising an authentically self-critical linguistic practice. And I found further encouragement in this direction through Luigi Nono, whom I saw a lot of during my time in Berlin. He talked to me about his own compositional problems in the field of music in a way that made me think about my own compositional problems in the field of writing, although I did not say so at the time; he would talk of his problems and I would think of mine, but after meeting Nono I finally resolved my own difficulties and began to write what would eventually become the first book to document these experiences, that is, Sguardo e destino. The title of the book was meant to suggest that the way of looking which had taken hold of me, that I had rediscovered after such a long period of time, was also a sort of destiny, that is, a genuine hermeneutical confirmation of one’s thought and existence. And thus I started to write this book, which was followed in Berlin by another, namely L’altra storia, a work very close to the first one in terms of its musical character.

Iofrida: So both these books were composed during your year in Berlin.

Gargani: Yes, both of them; and I have to say that this too involved a certain re-description, or re-definition, let us say, of the identity that one establishes for oneself through the narrative process, an experience that exemplifies the idea that personal identity – and this is a notion that I think is rather important – is not something immediately given, but is itself the result of a narrative reconstruction. That is why I sometimes say that we must re-describe ourselves in order to say who or what we are.

Iofrida: An identity constructed in the process of the writing …

Gargani: Yes; and thus what we are talking about here is precisely the opposite of any vitalistic approach, any notion of immediacy. It is true that Vattimo suspects me of a certain vitalism and irrationalism in this regard, but as I see it this is actually a misunderstanding of what I have written.

Iofrida: Could you say a little more about these reservations on Vattimo’s part?

Gargani: Vattimo is rather perplexed by these general declarations of principle regarding the relationship between philosophy and narration. As he has said,²¹ he senses a certain danger of aestheticism, or of an aestheticizing attitude, in Rorty’s thought. It is quite true that the latter speaks in support of the role of poetry and narrative, but this finds no literary effect or expression in the style of his own work: he writes like an analytical philosopher and employs the methods of purely discursive argument. Vattimo is already particularly suspicious about declarations of principle in this field, and even more about what could be described as performative embodiments of new codes of philosophical composition. And it is also true that he is not very interested in the field of science.

Iofrida: Thus we are speaking of a certain juncture between personal identity and philosophical composition, but also of a hybridization between fields that seem very remote from one another, such as science and literature.

Gargani: I must say that this blend of different elements, this hybridization of codes, offered me a philosophical means of elucidating events and situa-

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²¹ See G. Vattimo’s “Introduction” to the collection Filosofia ‘90, Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1991, p. ix, where he refers to “[…] the risks of relativism and aestheticism that appear to beset the pragmatist conclusions of Rorty’s hermeneutic approach.”
tions that could also employ narrative techniques. This approach is somewhat reminiscent of Musil’s notions of “soul” (Seele) and “precision” (Genauigkeit). It is no accident that I should mention Musil here, for he was a crucial source of certain ideas for me, since he was not only a great writer, but a gifted physicist and mathematician too. His work embodies not only the effective operation of soul, i.e. of the emotional dimension, and of intellectual clarity, i.e. of conceptual precision, but also the idea of taking things and structures that belong to the vocabulary of science and transforming them into personae of the narrative, of turning imaginary numbers into protagonists of the situation and circumstances being narrated, as he does in Young Törless for example. This significantly extends our conception of narrativity, for the narrative no longer merely involves human subjects, with their narrow dimensions of consciousness, their little egos, their mutual interactions, but now also embraces things that we normally regard as confined to an entirely different order of their own – imaginary numbers were usually encountered in mathematical textbooks, but to see what they become in a human and sociolinguistic context, to see how they can become protagonists within a narrative, this is an entirely original move.

Iofrida: Since you have mentioned Musil here, perhaps we can take this opportunity to step back a little, to the period between your purely philosophical work and the beginning of your more literary work. So it was roughly between the 1970s and 1987 that you were specifically engaged with Musil. In that sense, we could say, from the external point of view, that your path towards literature passed involved specific philosophical stages: there was the Viennese context, and then there was the English context of the Bloomsbury Group, and your study of Wittgenstein would naturally have encouraged an interest in both. It seems to me, in short, that during this phase you were still thinking of a literature that could provide a more suitable means of expressing and formulating a range of philosophical problems for which the classical and traditional language of concepts had proved inadequate. In this sense, it seems to me that you were not yet really interested in literature in its own right (at least in public), but were still largely concerned with it in the context of specifically philosophical issues.

Gargani: I had read Musil at the end of the 1960s, and I began to work on his thought and writings in an active way at the beginning of the 1970s, even to the point of contemplating a book on the subject. These years witnessed
a significant growth of Italian interest in the literature of central Europe, an interest documented in many books, editions, studies, and conferences at this time. But, in effect, it is true that I was still working on an exclusively philosophical level.

Iofrida: Yet looking at this years later, there is also a rediscovery of elements at a narrative level. It is as if you had discovered another dimension of the author here too.

Gargani: Indeed; but let us not forget that, in those earlier years, I was not merely reading Musil in his capacity as novelist and storyteller, but also studying his marvelous essays – that on Mach, the essays “The Knowledge of the Poet” and “Mathematical Man,” as well crucial essays such as “Helpless Europe” or “The German as Symptom.” These writings involved much philosophical contextualization, socio-cultural analysis, and critical reflection on the question of Zivilisation as Unkultur, as a merely mechanical dimension of society. They are essays which properly belong alongside the analyses of Wittgenstein, Simmel, and Spengler.

Iofrida: Thus all of this was closely related to your work on The Crisis of Reason.

Gargani: Yes, it was rather like extending the boundaries, something we could define, in short, as an osmosis, as a hybridization of codes – an attempt to thematize the way in which every text attends, as it were, to its own other.

Iofrida: In this sense, without minimizing the element of contingency, of unanticipated events, that marked the emergence of your literary work, one could say that in many ways your earlier career already suggested the possibility of this development. But let us return specifically to the 1980s and the question of literature. You spoke of writing as a means of constructing identity. Did the French tradition play any significant role here?

Gargani: I was thinking above all of Freud, when he says: “Where the id was, the ego shall be” – in the sense of redefining identity through an enlargement of self-awareness, or of Nietzsche’s remarks on “How one becomes oneself.” How on earth does one become what one is? If one is what one is, why does

one not become this directly or immediately, and why is it necessary to invent
for oneself what one is? This is the paradox that we also have to invent our-

selves in order to discover who we are, and it is thus a condition of construc-

tivity, performativity, of the construction of personal identity: I effectively
individuate what I am, but the individuation of my identity is not a spontane-
ous or immediate given, but the result of a search, a work of elaboration, a
process of mediation …

Iofrida: This does recall certain aspects of 20th century French thought, which
is well aware of the way in which writing transforms us, of writing as an
experience of transformation. This is expressed in a number of otherwise very
different positions, from Sartre’s *Les mots* through to the work of Blanchot and
Foucault: the idea of writing as an experience.

Gargani: I cannot say that these authors have guided or influenced me in this
respect, but I fully endorse what you say: when I have written, and when I still
write, with a certain cadence, in a narrative cadence, although not necessarily
only in this narrative cadence, when, in short, I seem to be writing with con-
siderable inspiration, or at least with more inspiration, I have precisely the sense
of undergoing an experience, and thus I completely recognize this description.
Here one could also mention Michel Leiris, who expressly defends the idea that
writing makes me, that it resembles a journey, an experience, a vicissitude that
we traverse. In effect, when I was writing, during my time in Berlin, I almost
had the impression of waiting for what I would become, for what would happen
to me by virtue of the fact that I had begun to write: as if an event greater than
myself would spring from the act of writing itself. This was something that I felt
in an almost sensory way: the fact that it was not I myself who was producing
the writing, but the writing that was producing me.

Iofrida: Foucault emphatically claimed that by the end of each new book he
felt he had also changed in some way.

Gargani: He truly sensed this to be a highly significant experience; I believe
that we all have some sense of this too, but the gift of the writer lies in becom-
ing fully aware of it, in knowing how to explore it productively. Otherwise we
would never recognize this when Foucault says it, we would never exclaim:
indeed, how true!

Iofrida: Although we cannot, in your case, speak of any direct influence from
these French models, it seems all the more interesting that such different
approaches should nonetheless coincide in this regard.
Gargani: This is an objective convergence, and perhaps sometimes such objective convergences are even more interesting than any direct historical influences, as Mazzino Montinari once pointed out to me with his usual extraordinary perceptiveness.

6. The Approach to Psychoanalysis: Matte Blanco and Resnik

Iofrida: We can also speak of a certain objective convergence with regard to another fundamental aspect of your more recent work, an aspect that is related in a more than merely episodic fashion with your experience of literature: I am referring here to the way in which you have interpreted psychoanalysis as one of the most fundamental points of cultural reference for us.

Gargani: In this regard, I would point out that I have had some direct contact with the culture of psychoanalysis. My first important encounter in this respect goes back to the end of the 1970s, when I made the acquaintance of Ignacio Matte Blanco and his principal follower in Italy, Pietro Bria, head of neuropsychiatry at the Gemelli Hospital in Rome. I remember one occasion in the company of Matte Blanco, with whom I felt a strong emotional bond up until the end of his life. He basically said to me: You have always struck me as a highly intelligent person, yet your books seemed to me to lack emotion; and now it seems to me that emotion has found its way into your books – and here he alluded to my text Sguardo e destino. I should also say that Matte Blanco had received encouragement from Bertrand Russell, and he once showed me a letter in which the co-author of Principia Mathematica enthusiastically welcomed the idea of providing a logico-mathematical formulation for psychoanalysis and the processes of the unconscious, of formalizing the language of psychoanalysis in some way. Matte Blanco himself presented a happy combination of emotional responsiveness and scientific commitment. He had a great passion for mathematics, and even as an old man he would often attend the mathematics courses on offer at the Sapienza in Rome, sitting amongst the students and doing the same exercises, exhibiting what Wittgenstein called the diligence of the great, like Bach, for example, who continued with his contrapuntal exercises even at an advanced age. Another important figure later on, as far as my own approach to psychoanalysis is concerned, was Salomon Resnik whom I met in the mid 1990s. I attended the seminars that he regularly held in Rome and I dedicated a number of texts to the discussion of his work.24

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As I see it, the thing that connects psychoanalysis and philosophical investigation is what I would call the idea of morphological method, namely the idea (in the same sense that we discussed earlier) of interconnected forms that develop out of one another, although not according to any inevitable concatenation of causal factors. We have already spoken of the way in which things “come together,” of the correspondances between things, and thus of thought conceived as a flux of scenes that are not connected in any linear way, not connected by mechanical concatenations or strictly formal implications, but rather in accordance with a “compositional” model. This is also how Wittgenstein tried to clarify his relationship to philosophy: “Ich glaube meine Stellung zur Philosophie dadurch zusammengefasst zu haben, indem ich sagte Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten” [“I believe I have summarized my attitude to philosophy by saying that philosophy is actually a matter of composition”]. In speaking of “dichten” here Wittgenstein surely alludes to Goethe’s Dichtung und Wahrheit [Poetry and Truth]. But “dichten” originally means “composing” or “putting together” in a variety of senses, and here of course it does not mean that philosophers should set about writing verses or stories. It refers to the process of composition in general, to the fact that the related elements of a situation are linked with one another by motivations of meaning, not by mechanical concatenation of any kind – an insight that is not irrelevant to mathematics either. Thus Wittgenstein can say: “die mathematische Methode ist kein Vehikel, um irgendwohin zu kommen” [“Mathematical method is not a vehicle for getting anywhere”].

Here again, we see there is no interference on the part of mechanical models of symbolism: we accept a mathematical proof for reasons that we can see, not for reasons we cannot see.

Iofrida: You speak of “motivations of meaning” rather than “mechanical concatenation” here. And this prompts me to ask you the following question: what is your attitude to the emphatic conception of “meaning” developed in a specific German cultural tradition at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, in Max Weber for example, in contrast and comparison with the methods of the natural sciences? What do you think, in short, about the distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences, the “sciences of spirit.”


Gargani: Yes, of course, I acknowledge the importance of this distinction: when Wittgenstein wrote the *Tractatus*, he once again made a distinction, in a new way, between what we can say and what we cannot say, and told his publisher Ludwig von Fricker: “This book consists of two parts, one written and one unwritten: the most important part of my book is the unwritten one.” For this unwritten part was not concerned with the language of the natural sciences at all, but acknowledged the inheritance of ethical and religious values, of questions concerning the meaning of life, and specifically provided a place for them. Thus we are talking of an appropriate and important distinction here, but it is also a rather corrupted one in our own contemporary cultural context, and especially in relation to the contemporary situation as far as science is concerned, a science that is significantly different from the science to which Dilthey, Weber, and others referred, and also different from the science discussed by Gadamer and other hermeneutically oriented philosophers, who really ought to recognize how things have changed in this respect. The problem with many hermeneutic thinkers, here in Italy and elsewhere, is that they still continue to think of science in terms of a naturalist and positivist model that is outdated precisely because science has changed so profoundly, and is aware of this change. So my answer to your question is rather oblique, in the sense that I acknowledge the great importance of this distinction, one which also guided several authors of whom we have already spoken in connection with the critique of “Zivilisation” and so on – and here I would refer to Simmel’s text *Man in the Metropolis*, which describes human beings in thrall to neurotic excitement, bombarded by a host of stimuli that they can no longer take in, and thus subjected to a fragmented perception of reality, to broken processes of thought. Again we might think of the “stream of consciousness” in this connection. The distinction we are talking about is the birthplace of these extremely important themes and developments. I would thus say, if we wish to preserve the significance of such a distinction, that we can see how science today has changed significantly with regard to its status and possibilities. I mean this in the sense that, at least in the view of the most perceptive philosophers and epistemologists, science is no longer pursued solely through experiment and mathematics, which was the basic image of scientific method entertained by the authors we have mentioned. For science consists, as it is now often expressed, in a “thick description” in which observation, experiment, logic and mathematics clearly play a crucial role, but in which cosmological and philosophical assumptions, aesthetic interests, and pragmatic considerations are also involved. All of these things furnish something like a constellation of elements in accordance with which a particular scientific theory can then be assessed. Well, in this sense, certain motivational components are also recognized within the structure of science
itself: a Prygogine, or a Tiezzi – an outstanding Italian scientist very close to Prygogine – readily acknowledge these motivational components that are at work in science.

Iofrida: One could say that the natural sciences themselves have moved towards a model that is much closer to that of the human sciences.

Gargani: Yes, and the expressions to which we have already referred, such as a “poetic listening to nature,” poetic in the sense of an active and engaged listening to nature, whereby science constructs its object just as art also constructs its object, the matrix that I have described as “compositional” – all of this helps to make the distinction in question more fluid in character.

Iofrida: We have made something of a digression here, although merely an apparent one, since psychoanalysis is one of those disciplines that also rather transcend this methodological distinction and opposition, and find an appropriate expression in this paradigm of Dichtung, of creative “composition” in the broadest sense.

Gargani: Yes, without a doubt. Rather than considering psychoanalysis simply in terms of etiology, of the search for causal explanation, or the search for truth, one could basically regard it as a re-compositional praxis that, prior to addressing the question of truth, addresses the problem of creating a minimum of equilibrium in the psychotic patient, a minimum of stability, in the hope of opening up the most hidden and inaccessible regions that belong to the unconscious. The approach adopted by psychoanalysis is thus less intellectualist and more constructivist and re-compositional in character, and is more concerned with recognizing the value and significance of the patient and his or her symptoms rather than simply treating the patient as an object under the microscope. In fact, today, people speak of the theory of the psychic “field” here: we are talking about psychoanalytic theories that engage with and respond to the psychotic subject, and this also represents a very significant change. In this context, which is that of Resnik, for example, we are involved in a work of re-composition, and one with a highly aesthetic component, that is constituted by signs that can in some way be analyzed, but also re-composed to provide a support or platform, a possible turning point, for the patient in question. For example, in his wonderful book Mental Space,26 Resnik cites the case of an eighteen year old psychotic patient and reports the following dialogue with the analyst: “I asked him what he was looking for, if there was

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something he was interested in. ‘History,’ he replied. ‘What history I asked?’ After a short pause he answered: ‘In Spain, there was Charles I, then Charles II, Charles III, and Charles IV. There was disagreement between them’” (since he is psychotic this list has a very precise significance for the patient, for the psychotic does not conceptualize time, does not really have a sense of time; a psychotic is someone who presses down a single key and wants to play the 9th symphony of Beethoven all at once: for him everything is captured in a single present). Resnik suggested that perhaps a Charles V was needed to reconcile these conflicts. The patient replied: “‘Yes, if one of them speaks it means war,’ adding, “it was only when Charles V of Austria came along that there was reconciliation, and the kingdom was united.’” He thus takes his stand on an objective fact – Charles V who unites the Spanish crown with the German Empire to create a realm on which the sun never sets – but this objective fact somehow serves at the same time to reconcile, or re-compose, these conflicting and discordant figures by bringing into the psychic field of the patient. This is an example of what I mean by the work of “composition.”

6. Current Perspectives and Future Developments

Iofrida: Now that we have talked about literature and psychoanalysis, perhaps we may now turn to your current work considered as a whole. The concern with science continues to play a central role here, and this alone, as we have already suggested, strongly distinguishes your own approach from other more or less contemporary positions in philosophy, those of Heidegger, of Vattimo …

Gargani: As far as Heidegger, and Vattimo’s conception of “weak thought” is concerned, I would emphasize what I have already said: Heidegger, and Vattimo follows him in this, basically ends to measure the entire destiny of the West in terms of purely philosophical texts, and the idea of talking about “the destiny of the West” in this way is already questionable. For it projects the idea that there is, for good or ill, some single univocal development at work here. This approach seems to conflate the history of Europe or the West with the history of philosophy when in fact so many other things were involved in this process: political events themselves, the great development of the physico-mathematical sciences, the emergence of biology, and so on. All this emphatically reveals the insensitivity, the deafness as it were, of this hermeneutically oriented culture that persists in rigidly interpreting the culture of science in accordance with extremely positivistic paradigms, and indeed very old-fashioned positivistic paradigms, in which contemporary
science could hardly recognize itself. A scientist like Prigogine would not recognize them as appropriate to his own work, and nor would a scientist like our own Enzo Tiezzi, who certainly pursues “hard science,” but also shows a notable conceptual and philosophical openness (and it is no accident, amongst other things, that these are authors expressly reacting to certain aspects of Enlightenment culture, and specifically to the “scientism” of the Enlightenment). And then there is Heidegger’s startling declaration that “the sciences do not think:” he may have meant this in some Pickwickian and far from ordinary sense, but is also something of an insult to real good sense. I am not referring here to the evident fact, now obvious to everyone, that we have witnessed all these great scientific discoveries, these great advances in knowledge that we are all aware of. Rather, what I am emphasizing here is the capacity for thinking that is evinced by science itself. Specifically on the terrain that Heidegger is talking about, the greatness of a Mach, of an Einstein, and of so many others, who contributed to the great scientific revolution of the early 20th century, is not simply or solely connected with the brilliance of their specific discoveries, or with the particular scientific talent of such figures. Rather, what is especially striking to me, and to others, is the ability of such scientists to question the conceptual schemes, the traditionally accepted procedures of their respective disciplines, their ability to twist free of these inherited schemes and procedures. I would almost say that the effort required by Einstein not simply to carry on interpreting space and time, and a range of parameters and phenomena, in the terms already developed by the science of physics, was even greater than that involved in the actual formulation and elaboration of a new particular doctrine. It is the capacity to rethink certain categories, from the very beginning, that constitutes Einstein’s genius. It is thus no surprise if someone may go and read Einstein today in the way that people once went to read the Bible, namely to find appropriate assistance and support for genuine and authentic thought.

IoFra: We could almost say that the highest reaches of scientific thought reveal a level of creativity and inventiveness that is not inferior to that involved in a great work of art.

Gargani: I should point out that in the informal texts that accompanied his technical writings, and in which he said a little about his own theories, Einstein claimed that the scientists of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries were somewhat “intoxicated” – and he specifically uses this expression – by the idea that we could derive the axioms of physics by logical methods, that is, by processes of abstraction. And this idea is naturally entirely misleading since, within certain limits, an inductive interpretation of nature, so to speak, is capable of confirm-
ing the Newtonian theory as well as Einstein’s own theory, i.e. is capable of corro-
borating basic scientific and theoretical approaches that are profoundly dif-
ferent from one another. And this gives rise to the very element of thought that
Heidegger implicitly seems to misunderstand: the fact that theoretical physics,
as a specific discourse, emerges once we realize, on the basis of Einstein’s work,
that science is not generated by extracting law-like generalizations from obser-
vations of manifold particular data, but springs from a theoretical approach,
and from an exercise in scientific imagination. And I must say that Heidegger
should not claim that science is merely a technically oriented form of praxis,
when we consider that Einstein also spoke of a crucial rapport with nature, of a
certain empathy or *Einfühlung* in this connection. Of course, he did not under-
stand this empathy in a sentimental or psychological sense, but rather as a way
of adopting nature’s perspective in order to comprehend the possible law-like
character of nature itself, to understand what the laws of nature must be like if
light travels through space with a finite velocity. It is the same kind of think-
ing deployed in thermodynamics when it asked what happens to energy, to the
laws of energy, if the entirety of mechanical energy cannot be transformed into
kinetic energy, but is reduced to a lower level of energy, such as thermal energy.
This capacity for asking certain questions, one that clearly does not spring from
any merely passive or inductive observation of experience, is precisely what
we can properly call “thinking.” I would also add that these developments of
scientific thought, and these scientific discoveries, are connected with those
forms of emancipation from a certain conception of rationality, from a cer-
tain traditional notion of common sense, that have proved so important for
our individual lives and for our culture in general. In short, it is science that
has allowed us effectively to liberate and elevate the imagination, the human
imaginary, by furnishing complex new paradigms, and paradigms that envisage
different possible ways of regarding the same phenomenon. Science has thus
helped to put into some question the traditional concept of rationality that has
sustained the Enlightenment approach (and of which the Enlightenment itself
is a powerful expression), a concept of rationality that encouraged us to believe
that everything we know, that the entire order of our concepts and our claims,
were somehow already implicitly contained within an ahistorical and atemporal
structure, within a reason that is already formed and spontaneously given from
the start. But here too, we are compelled to acknowledge the historicity of rea-
son, the fact that the human being is an evolving animal, and thus one that also
transforms its own conceptual resources and possibilities.

*Ifrida:* Since you have referred specifically to the Enlightenment tradition
here, it would be interesting to know what you make of the debate on this
subject that has recently appeared in *La Repubblica.*
Gargani: I was struck by the intellectual poverty of this debate. I describe it in this way because it actually resembled a debate from the 1950s, when people were still asking whether to follow the road of reason or to adopt other paths in the face of the various forces that inhibited a fully developed power of reason from expressing itself properly. We are talking about a discussion that was framed in extremely narrow terms and addressed within a very restricted context. It failed to take account of all those aspects, principally of scientific culture itself but also of philosophical culture, that have already significantly distanced us, without thereby falling back into obscurantism, from the perspective of a perfect rationality, one that thinks of itself as a hot air balloon that only has to sever its moorings to the ground in order to rise with perfect freedom into the sky. For today, from physics through biology to economics and many other areas and disciplines, including the theory of business management and commercial enterprise, we discover a different horizon that is shared to some extent in all these fields: the idea that we always operate with a limited form of rationality. The concept of “bounded rationality,” for example, has been theorized in the context of socio-economic thought by the Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon, who has argued that we do not operate in conditions of perfect knowledge, but rather, let us say, within a certain regime of light and dark. The contemporary scientist, who sees the chaotic, disruptive, and contingent dimension of the scene of physical phenomena extending further and further, would hardly be able to recognize his own activities in the image of scientific rationality, of human rationality itself, as it emerges from this journalistic debate, one that reflects the narrow conception of rationality espoused by Eugenio Scalfari. But the contemporary scientists in question are obviously not endorsing irrationalistic approaches themselves: they speak of a deterministic chaos, of a chaos that manifests itself within an inexorably law-like framework. Yet, at the same time, this law-like character reveals so many levels of freedom, and exhibits such complexity, that it presents itself to us as a physical reality in which chaos prevails, in which linear systems, as Paul Davies and Joseph Ford have said, are as rare as the proverbial white fly, as we say in Italian. In short, the debate in question offers the reader a completely distorted impression of the cultural situation in which we actually find ourselves: it was like re-reading some ancient diatribe between the protagonists of Enlightenment and the forces of obscurantism …

Iofrida: It is in this sense that you compared it with a debate of the 1950s.

Gargani: Yes, with all the anxious concerns regarding the damaging consequences for reason that might result from obscurantist approaches. But in fact, with Gödel in the 1930s, and already with quantum physics from the 1920s
onwards, scientific culture has typically discovered and investigated various forms of limitation that bear on knowledge. Yet, as Prygogine has pointed out, while ascertaining a limit certainly signals a line we cannot cross, it also discloses a new possibility, and ultimately, therefore, it is also a kind of knowledge. But it is quite true that we can no longer accept and no longer appeal to the ideal of a given or a priori rationality that is entirely constituted in advance. Marvin Minsky, whom I have already cited, emphasizes that rationality, and understanding, are not spontaneous products in their own right, structures rooted in the human mind from the moment that it originally emerges; rather the mind, understanding, and reason represent an enormously complex “society” of trials and interventions, dispositions, attempts, mistakes, refutations, and so forth, that we undertake and develop over the course of our lives, and thus our rationality is also the result and consequence of these practical interventions.

Iofrida: And also at the level of the species …

Gargani: Yes indeed, and here we can refer to another important contemporary scientist, Gerald Edelman, who provides rational and scientific arguments against the re-appropriation of positivistic models so characteristic of that combination of biology, artificial intelligence, and experimental and linguistic psychology that defines much that goes by the name of “cognitive science,” and that he describes as an intellectual fraud.27

Iofrida: Perhaps we could say that this “cognitivism” is the most refined contemporary expression of positivism?

Gargani: Yes indeed; and Edelman claims, in the most objective and impartial manner, that “cognitivism” is an intellectual fraud since it actually reintroduces the old ghosts of metaphysics into a field that presents itself as the most emphatic expression of concrete empirical science. But if, as he says, we reduce the mind to a computer, to a Turing machine, it is clear that our principal attention will fall on the computer software rather than the hardware, that priority will be ascribed to the former rather than the latter. This means that the biomedical and psychophysical basis of human thought is completely obscured or overlooked, for the way in which a specific program can be run on different machines will also be applied to the process of mental functioning, thereby uprooting and disconnecting the latter from its psychophysical bases. To the extent, then, that the mind is compared to a computer, one

naturally hypothesizes a hidden subject, a demiurge or semi-divinity, a director, a secret figure who coordinates all the calculative functions that are supposed to correspond to our thought processes. Thus “cognitivism” makes two basic errors: it reintroduces the old ghosts of metaphysics, and it commits what analytical philosophers, in the wake of Gilbert Ryle, call a “category mistake:” it describes one sort of thing in terms appropriate to other sorts of things, and in a typical inversion that is also an expression of a category mistake, it ascribes to the object itself, to the system under investigation, the categories, the parameters, and the functions that belong to the character of our knowledge, but are not distinctive features of being or reality itself. And thus we simply enact the story, recounted by Edelman, of the mouse that finds its way out of the labyrinth in the laboratory test, and tells one of the other mice: You know, I’ve managed to train my psychologist really well: I have taught him to give me a piece of cheese whenever I get out of the labyrinth. One must always guard against this classic inversion whereby the properties of the investigation, the indispensable means for approaching the system to be explained, are transformed into the actual features and constitutive properties of the object, rather than being recognized as distinctive properties of our own capacities and our own methodology of investigation. There is another aspect to the inherent metaphysics of “cognitivism:” if the mind, thought, and language are a calculus, this produces the semantic problem of reference to the world. How does it come about that this syntax, this world of pure logico-mathematical forms, possesses the referential capacity to signify, to indicate, to represent the world? Here we witness another metaphysical leap, for of course one then postulates that the world is already categorically structured in itself in accordance with the concepts of our methodologies, with the structure of our minds, and this – the idea that there is some kind of isomorphic relation or pre-established harmony between language and reality – is a fundamental philosophical superstition. In the face of this philosophical superstition that reality is intrinsically constituted and organized in accordance with our concepts, it seems to me that the more fruitful and rewarding path is that pursued by Edelman, by Lewontin, or, in Italy, by Mario Ageno, or by other psychologists and linguistic theorists such as Lakoff or Margaret Donaldson,28 who emphasize the decisive importance of the biophysical basis of the mind and claim that interaction with the environment produces sensory images and representations that subsequently become the guiding-images of

our language. As an example here, we may think of the schema of sensory-perceptual imagination that may be the biophysical model that underlies the possibility of transposition or “metaphor.”

Iofrida: In short, motor schemata …

Gargani: They are motor schemata, or models from which we can obtain a syntax through a process of formalization. All this implies a conception of Homo sapiens as a subject that attains to language through an evolutionary development that is not based on an atemporal, mechanistic, and purely logicized structure, like a computer, but is a process that leads to a certain turn. We are talking about a process of natural evolution that Edelman defines as “semantic bootstrapping,” one that does not spring from some directing agency that coordinates the various neural processes from behind the scenes. The decisive category here is that of “re-entry,” a process in which groups of motor processes, sensory perceptors, and neural networks exchange signals with one another and thereby produce a new situation, an evolutionary turn on the basis of which the human being at a certain point can begin to speak. This “re-entry” is not a “feedback mechanism” either, for the latter would once again require some sort of external control, but an immanent process where different functions exchange signals and achieve a new and more evolved order of equilibrium.  

Iofrida: In this sense, with regard to the cognitive science approach, you would stress the priority of semantics over syntax...

Gargani: There is indeed an express priority of semantics here, for the latter is a sensory representation that springs from the psychomotor experiences that lead to the specific production of models. And this, amongst other things, is what explains, in Edelman’s view, the analogical character of our symbolic interactions with the world: whereas a computer functions and proceeds digitally in terms of discrete units, the signals exchanged between the organism and the environment are ambiguous, qualitative, and analogical in character.

Iofrida: This reminds me of Merleau-Ponty’s argument in The Structure of Behavior, where he was already arguing, on the basis of the results obtained by Gestalt psychology, that the relationship between organism and environment was characterized by an element of ambiguity.

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29 In this connection I would refer the reader to my essay “Autoelevazione semantica e rientro,” in the volume Limiti e frontiere della scienza, Rome and Bari: Laterza, 1999, pp. 185-190.
Gargani: Yes, absolutely; Merleau-Ponty was a genuinely pioneering philosopher in this regard, a thinker of great relevance, and an exemplary demonstration of how philosophical investigation can retain all of its own originality and vitality in constant connection and fruitful collaboration with the results of the sciences. This question is extremely important from another point of view too: precisely on account of certain problems and difficulties that have continued to beset the physical sciences in recent years (physics has discovered a whole range of particles and furnished an inventory of the constituents of the physical world, but has yet to develop a relevant unified theory in this regard), the 1990s saw the rise of a new and increasingly influential biological paradigm, one that even more typically represents certain scientistic and positivist perspectives. In this particular respect, the principal focus of attention has been the nature of the brain, and the related neurosciences that offer models that respond to a certain need for security far more readily than the contemporary science of physics is capable of doing. But in the face of these developments there are figures such as S. J. Gould, Lewontin, Edelman, and others, who continue to pursue a much more fruitful line of research, and argue that the biological sciences and the neurosciences can also adopt a non-positivist approach to these questions.

Iofrida: Let us discuss some other themes of your current work: the question of pragmatism, that of praxiology, the closely connected issue of a new concept of truth. In recent times, amongst other things in an essay on Rorty (an author very dear to you, with whom you have had many opportunities to exchange ideas), you have insisted on contrasting the “truth” with the “meaning of truth.” And in the same sense you have spoken of “the manifold turns of truth,” a formula that I think effectively captures your current position on this matter: there is a significant emphasis upon “truth,” it seems to me, that is, a polemic directed against vulgar skepticism and perspectivism, an emphasis upon the “grain of the real,” and at the same time a demand that “reality” and “truth” be related to change, variety, difference; and there is also your emphasis on the notion of truth as “action,” as opposed to that of truth as “representation.” Yet, at the same time, you are very concerned to distinguish this understanding of “pragmatism” from that which essentially identifies “action” with “instrumental behavior,” with immediate practical efficacy and utility. In opposition to simple utilitarianism, you emphasize an idea of action that bears its end within itself, that has value in its own right. And this kind of action, while not of course being expressly “anti-technological” in orientation, is much richer than all merely technological intervention: it implies an inter-human relationship, and involves communication, feeling, the beautiful …
Gargani: I believe that these versions of pragmatism are borne today on the waves of the crisis of the traditional Enlightenment model that we have already discussed, in the sense that they displace the idea of semantic categories (meaning, truth, and reference) interpreted in terms of correspondence, and emphatically revalue the dimension of action, not only in the sense of immediate practical intervention, but in the sense that thinking, and all our symbolic practices and procedures, are themselves actions. For if it is true that there is no such thing as a spontaneous or pre-constituted rationality, then the edifice of human reason must be regarded as an organism constructed step by step through constructive procedures of one sort or another. What does this mean for the Enlightenment approach? It means that if the Enlightenment has indeed promoted what we may call a scientistic conception of reality, the powerful projects of social emancipation that it encouraged need no longer be tied irrevocably to this conception, and that we can embrace the one without the other, and reformulate the latter on the basis of a quite different form of thought. What interests me about pragmatism, in figures such as Rorty and Davidson (although the latter cannot really be defined as a pragmatist, he offers certain conceptual resources to those who, like Rorty in particular, do operate in a neo-pragmatist context) is something more than the traditional aspect of the pragmatic tradition – the conformity between actions and ends, or the utilitarian consequences of our behavior. What interests me, I would say, is the praxiological basis implicit in these conceptions, that is, the emphasis upon the dimension of action itself. For I believe that this leads to a significant extension, an irradiation as it were, into a whole variety of different fields. And here I could mention Hermann Weyl, the great constructivist mathematician, who used to say: there is an original darkness in reason, and we do not grasp the truth by opening our eyes or parting our eyelids; there is an original darkness in reason, and we must analyze or rationalize, as it were, the actions that we have already performed. And this gives rise to an idea of rationality as a kind of coherent analysis and reconstruction, as a process that was in primis a pre-eminently operative and constructive procedure, one that was not already certified or guaranteed, so to speak, by some original explanatory fact, some original fact rooted in reason itself. And this approach leads directly to something that I find extremely interesting: the retrospective character of our elucidations and explanations, the fact that there is a certain praxis of which philosophical reflection represents a rational reconstruction post festum, as it were. Philosophy reconstructs something that first transpired as an accomplished action, that was the result of an operation in its own right. Thus, with regard to mathematics, from the perspective of the older traditional pragmatism one would have said: this is all good and useful because the precise calculation of vectors permits us to construct our buildings and bridges. Whereas I would say: it is not good
because it serves to accomplish these objectives, but because one can manage
to do it all, because it represents its own success, it is the successful application
of its own ongoing procedure. These strike me as interesting and promising
lines of thought that can basically also be extended to the Freudian practice of
psychoanalysis which is based on the concept of Nachträglichkeit, of the retro-
spective reconstruction and rationalization of the process that we subsequently
provide. And again, in the specifically epistemological context, I would men-
tion Lakatos when he says that the rational explanation, the reconstruction of
a certain scientific discovery, goes into the notes, in the sense that we only
provide it after the event.

Iofrida: All this naturally reminds me of Hegel’s famous comparison of phi-
losophy with the owl of Minerva that takes flight only with the falling of the
dusk.

Gargani: Hegel actually claims that “philosophy is its own time apprehended in
thought.” And he did not regard the need for philosophy as something that was
always present or unconditionally the same, but interpreted this need as some-
thing that manifests itself in specific historical ways. Thus, for example, the age
from which Hegel himself emerged was one that experienced an emphatic need
for philosophy because the immediately preceding Enlightenment culture, as
an intellectual outlook, as a culture of divisions or Trennungen, posed a specific
philosophical problem. Si parva licet, I would say that I was inspired by a rather
similar thought in an essay that is particularly dear to me, L’attrito del pensiero,
when I claimed that we think because something is given to be thought. And
this is Hegel’s major lesson, something that also reveals the whole difference
between the Critique of Pure Reason and the Phenomenology of Spirit.

Iofrida: Basically, we are recognizing the fact that, beneath the metaphysical
exterior of Hegel’s philosophy, we can discover certain moves and develop-
ments of thought that are extraordinarily fruitful and suggestive.

Gargani: I would also like to say something else in this specific regard. In
November 2000 we organized a conference on the figure of Christ at the
University of Pisa. The participants included theologians, philosophers, church
historians, specialists in Jewish and Arabic history and culture, and I delivered
a paper in which I analyzed the conceptions of Jesus that have been devel-
oped at certain particularly relevant and significant moments in the history
of modern and contemporary philosophy. But in this context I was especially
struck by a specific idea of Hegel’s: the thought that we only attain to the
infinite through the finitizing movement of the finite, a particularly relevant
and important perspective that lies at the origin of theoretical approaches that also reach beyond philosophy itself, that are also related to issues in semantics, to the fact that there is a play of the trace, as it were, a movement that opens up another trace and restores a concept of the infinite in terms of the finitization of the finite. This is comparable to the notion that Jesus died twice, as Maurizio Ferraris has put it: there is a natural death, and then there is the death of everything that is solely natural in him, but now understood in terms of this concrete and historical approach. Yet this also represents a semantic paradigm, in the sense that one specific and determinate element, precisely by being negated and “finitized,” releases a cascade of further symbols and significations. Just as we rise to the infinite by finitizing the finite, so too we rise to the symbol from the empirical and sensory sign.

Iofrida: What you say once again recalls many aspects of French philosophical thought in the 1960s. It seems no accident that this entire generation of French philosophers was educated under the influence of Jean Hyppolite.

Gargani: This only confirms the enormous significance of Hegel, whose thought does indeed harbor many of the themes and issues we have been discussing here. I would specifically draw attention to his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion in this regard. I was particularly struck by this semantic model that anticipates Derrida: la différencé is already clearly suggested by Hegel …

Iofrida: In fact, in his essay “La différencé,” in Margins of Philosophy, Derrida cites a passage from Hegel’s Jena Logic, in Koyré’s translation, that specifically concerns the concept of difference. But now, by way of conclusion, I should like to ask a couple of rather complex questions. The first concerns the specific perspectives of your own work, but also, more generally, the political–cultural domain of the Left, in which you were formed and educated from the years of your adolescence onwards, and of which you yourself have been a significant exponent and defender. During the various stages we have evoked in the course of our conversation – from Knowledge without Foundations, through The Crisis of Reason, and up to your most recent works – your work has emphasized, and with ever greater insistence, the necessity for the entire political–cultural legacy of the Left to be completely and radically rethought. Yet it would seem to me, on the contrary, that for some years now the greater part of the Left has simply attempted to adopt various pre–constituted intellectual schemes and frameworks from elsewhere, rather than actually opening up new lines of thought and enquiry.

Yes, I agree with you here, and I believe that the considerable social and cultural sense of unease we feel today derives from the fact that this process of re-thinking has not taken place, from the fact that it has been furtively, and indeed massively, evaded. To undertake this re-thinking in a serious way would involve, on the contrary, addressing all situations from the perspective, technically speaking, of complexity, from the perspective of a double view, complex view that is liberated from rigid and ideological commitments to purely linear modes of thought. It is also a fact that Marxist culture in Italy, in my judgment, has always been fundamentally rooted in a particular Enlightenment culture that is a crucial and intrinsic part of our culture, but one which must be developed and carried forward in new ways. It is clear that the Viennese positivists were also inspired by the Enlightenment tradition, though certainly not in a rabidly conservative fashion. On the contrary, this tradition was combined with certain quite new approaches, however problematic they may have been. In this sense, the positivism adopted here in Pisa was also developed in a rather original manner. Yet the worst thing about Togliatti’s legacy, as far as the culture of the Left in Italy is concerned, lay precisely in the fact that his approach reflected the horizon of Enlightenment thought as interpreted in a highly academic, restrictive, and reductive way. That is why it showed so little understanding for new approaches and developments in a whole variety of areas, from psychoanalysis to music, to the visual and plastic arts, to philosophy itself. As a specific example of what I mean, I recall the way in which, in the sphere of epistemology, so much attention was lavished on the copy or “reflection” theory of knowledge, as defended by Lenin in his book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, with its unfortunate misinterpretation of Mach, whom Lenin simply reduced to a crude positivist. But in fact Mach was an extremely interesting figure who anticipated many subsequent epistemological insights, and indeed represents a model for lively, flexible and open thought, exactly the kind of thought we find in Wittgenstein or Musil. All this brings us back to the fact that the part played by political polemics and political conditioning was so excessive that it hardly left us any room for genuine cultural work, for intellectual curiosity, for the desire to experiment, for all those conditions which allow what I call “the friction of thought” to unfold properly. In other words, a political approach that is too wary and suspicious about intellectual work itself has been, in my view, the principal impediment that has hindered the development of that complex perspective, that double perspective I mentioned, and that has resisted the idea of challenging received limits, that has simply accepted the parameters that define our activities and prescribe the objectives to be pursued. The notion of the “organic intellectual” in the context of effective historical practice has proved to be very damaging in this regard.
Iofrida: But speaking more generally, and in the specific light of what we have just been saying, how would you now describe and interpret your personal and intellectual journey, from the very early years in Genoa, from the challenges of the war and your earliest engagement in politics, to your interests and activities today, in the reality of our world, a world that is at once polymorphic and globalized in character, and marked, most recently, by such tragic events? Can you identify a thread of continuity in all this, or would you discover ruptures and discontinuities instead? And on the basis of your own individual and historical experience, could you outline your current perspective on things, or suggest, at least in nuce, the contemporary horizon of your thought?

Gargani: For me of course, as in every person’s own case, there is some sense of unity to the existence, the history, the culture, that one has actually traversed. In every one of us there is a kind of “blind imprinting” that distinguishes each individual from almost every other individual, and that for this very reason provides a certain line of continuity that connects the vicissitudes of individual experience. But we are not talking about any rigid identity or self-identical continuity here. That would be a primitive metaphysical supposition. We remain ourselves in the course of constant changes and developments in the sense of a dynamic identity that elaborates its own balance and integrity by continually re-elaborating the unforeseeable contingencies of one’s life history. From writers and novelists, from neuroscientists, and even from certain perceptive philosophers, we have learnt that every time we remember things we also re-elaborate, reshape, and reconfigure our memory of the past. But we must be careful here, for the past changes! As far as my own life in particular is concerned, I would probably say that the current socio-political situation, after the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11, has somehow taken me back to the atmosphere of chaos, irrationality, and contingency in which I grew up as a child during the Second World War. There will no doubt be various reasons for what is happening now, just as there were then, but this does not change the vertiginous sensation that assails us today. I do not believe that the ideas or discoveries of any particular individual can really change things. It is only a different mode of living, a different form of social life, that can really provide an appropriate response to our problems, including our intellectual problems. Everything depends on how far human beings are capable of remembering that they are human beings after all. In the immediate context, the most serious and important thing, the approach that is best fitted to address the problems, or at least the problems of our culture at the present time, so it seems to me, would be to sustain authentic thoughts, concepts, and words, to preserve them from the distortions of intellectual narcissism.
and mannerism, to protect them from the spirit of rivalry and virtuosity that threatens, for example, to transform philosophical arguments and discussions into contests where there always has to be a winner and a loser. There are times when thought and reality need to withdraw and conceal themselves, as it were, when we are confronted with a weakening of “motivation,” understood here in a double sense: the ethical sense that is concerned with motives, reasons and values, and the esthetic sense that is concerned with motivic, harmonic, and connective considerations. In other words, we require a better society, one that is more fruitful and rewarding for us to inhabit. In a social crisis as radical as that in which we now explicitly find ourselves, the only appropriate response is an equally radical reassessment and reconsideration of values. This is what people are waiting for, but the general culture has long since lagged behind in this regard, just as the Italian commercial class has seriously lagged behind, and taken so little interest in developing and addressing the social responsibilities of business and economic life in general.

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

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