

Silence, the Utmost in Ambiguity

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**Abstract:** In his article "Silence, the Utmost in Ambiguity" Mario Perniola presents a historical perspective on the meanings and development of the term "ambiguity" from ancient Greek to the modern age. Perniola's perspective is not a review of different approaches and schools of thought; instead, he presents an alternative philosophical and aesthetic discourse he counter-poses to modern and contemporary cultural positions which he considers useful in order to explain the state of today's art and intellectual discourse. Perniola does so by stressing the significance of silence as the aesthetic attitude that combines contemplation and action. Drawing on the work of Pascal and Gracián and on works by the masters of modern rationalization — Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein — Perniola proposes an intellectual disposition that rejects immediate gratifications and the cacophony of today's deluge of information and thus he reclaims attention, selection, and discretion as functions relevant to aesthetic and ethical values.

**Mario PERNIOLA****Silence, the Utmost in Ambiguity**

Trans. from the Italian by Theodore Ell and Anthony Stephens

The fundamental question raised by the notion of ambiguity can be formulated in these terms: does ambiguity refer to the possibility of two interpretations or many interpretations? From an etymological point of view, there is no doubt that the first answer is the correct one. In Ancient Greek, *amphibolía* contains the prefix *amphí*, which means "on one side and the other" and therefore implies that the "sides" are a pair. This adverb entered into competition with *perí*, the meaning of which is "around," and which prevailed. Furthermore, it is interesting to observe that one of the first uses of the word *amphibolía*, in Herodotus, for example, was in a strategic sense and meant "to be attacked from both sides," to be caught in the crossfire. From this derives the verb *epamphoterízō*, which means to engage in double dealing, to help two adversaries simultaneously. This is not unlike the numerical adjective in Latin *ambo*, identical to the Greek *ámpho* (dual), which refers exclusively to the fact that two people are operating in the same place at the same time, while *uter* indicates that the two are separated in time and place. *Amphibolía* is therefore the same as the Latin *ambiguitas* (from *ambo* and *ago*, that is, literally to send something in two directions). Whilst this distinction may be blurred in classical Latin, with compound verbs with the prefix *ambi-* suggesting vagueness or more than two directions, and whilst this blurring is certainly also present when the word enters English in the sixteenth century, it is arguable that the dual sense tends to predominate.

Many ancient authors took an interest in ambiguity, producing numerous examples which, for the most part, relate to the practice of rhetoric and public oratory. For instance, Cicero discusses it with regard to the conflicts which can arise in the interpretation of a written document in which some words are missing (*De Oratore* I 110). Quintilian produces numerous examples of grammatical and syntactical ambiguity (*amphibolía*, in *Istitutio Oratoria* VII, 9) and provides advice on resolving them: one must understand which of the two words or expressions is more correct and more natural, or what the writer or speaker effectively wished to say. These considerations have been repeated down the centuries by many scholars of rhetoric. This conception of ambiguity, remaining faithful to the first etymological meaning of the word which implies the existence of a dual opposition, seems to fade away completely in the twentieth century from both the literary and philosophical points of view, with regard to modernist criticism and existentialism respectively. They broaden enormously the meaning of the term ambiguity and at the same time they assign it a highly positive value. For William Empson, the author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, it is the defining characteristic of poetry *par excellence*; for Simone de Beauvoir, in her *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (*The Ethics of Ambiguity*), human existence is itself ambiguous because free action clashes with the unpredictable opacity of others and of prevailing circumstances, thus distorting its purposes. In this way the notion of ambiguity acquires a meaning different from the original: we are no longer dealing with ambiguity in the strict sense, limited to an opposition of two entities, but with a word or action susceptible to an indeterminate number of different interpretations.

The thesis I argue in this article is that in the modern sense of the word, ambiguity is at its most intense not in words, nor in action, but in silence. To avoid any misunderstanding, when "ambiguity" is used in its more modern sense of the plurality of interpretations, I prefer to speak of the *polyvalence* of silence; I use the word ambiguity only when we are presented with an alternative split specifically between two elements. If we consider the history of the notion of silence, which extends over thousands of years, we find ourselves confronting an ambiguity. Over the long history of this notion, two opposing conceptions of silence, in fact, have emerged: the first associates silence with contemplation, the second with action. With some degree of inexactness, the first tendency could be defined as mystical and the second as rhetorical. For the first, silence is related to a psychological state which cannot be expressed in words, for the second silence is, by contrast, an attitude with a particular meaning. Beyond these two dominant trends there exists a third which is more difficult to define, in which the two aspects, contemplative and active, join and intersect. I explain briefly the fundamental aspects of the first two concepts and then concentrate more on those instances in which silence is configured as

an attitude which is neither entirely contemplative nor entirely active, neither wholly spiritual, nor wholly practical, despite its partaking of both aspects. I would say that in these cases, the original, ancient notion of ambiguity (double meanings) and that of the modern period (a polyvalence of interpretations) reciprocally intensify one another, giving rise to an enigma.

The first, mystical conception construes silence as an interior state of feeling, preparatory to the ecstatic union with the One, the ineffable Supreme Being, which by its very nature is beyond words. This idea is expressed by Plotinus, who considers silence as a factor tied to creative contemplation, and it is present in many neo-Platonic authors; for example, in Marius Victorinus and in Proclus. Similarly, in the esotericism of late antiquity silence is linked to the decline of the word and the senses as they give way to a sort of immediate awareness of truth. In the *Confessions* (IX, 12) Augustine considers silence the most apt reaction to extremely painful situations, such as the death of his mother: at that pass, indeed, no form of lamentation, cries or groans appeared seemly to him.

In negative medieval theology — in Meister Eckhart and Johannes Tauler, for instance — there appears the connection between silence (*Schweigen*) and calm (*Stille*), intended to indicate a state of serenity faithful to the divine presence in the soul of the pious. A very important consequence of this theory is the thesis of the ambiguity of being: in fact, between the being of God and the being of creatures there is not unity, but vagueness of sense. The being of God is absolutely other with regard to the being of creatures. The German adjective *still* may be regarded as an untranslatable philosophical term, for it signifies silence, mystery, and the absence of movement: for this reason it is one of those terms in which the religious and poetic dimensions meet and mix. In the works of Nicolaus Cusanus at the dawn of the modern age, the vision of God, defined as *pulchritudo absoluta*, implies a still and silent contemplation. The religious importance of silence remains present even today in the vow of silence, to which some secular organizations and religious orders, such as the Trappists, notoriously dedicate themselves. This tradition is further reinforced by Martin Luther, who, when translating verse 20 of Psalm 35, terms the faithful "die Stillen im Lande." This becomes a conventional designation for various trends of thought of the Protestant revival of the seventeenth century, particularly amongst the Moravian Brethren, in Pietism, in Zinzendorf's writings. In the second half of the seventeenth century this sensibility becomes secularized, transforming its character from being religious-poetic to philosophical-aesthetic. The art historian Johann Winckelmann plays a fundamental role in this transformation, defining beauty as "noble simplicity and a tranquil, silent grandeur" ("edle Einfalt und stille Größe"): he considered Ancient Greek sculpture the greatest manifestation of the essence of art and interpreted the statue group *Laocoön* as the example *par excellence* of his idea of beauty, in which contemplation, immobility, and silence meet. This notion had a great following among poets and writers, such as Hölderlin, Goethe, and Herder, and played a decisive role in the Kantian definition of the aesthetic experience as an essentially contemplative pleasure without interest in the real existence of the contemplated object. There is, finally, a therapeutic version of this first trend, which manifests itself even today, in New Age culture, for instance. Mystical silence, therefore, cannot be considered ambiguous in the strict sense, but polyvalent in the absolute sense.

Independently of this mystical conception of silence which breaks into aesthetics, there has been since antiquity another conception of silence which understands it as practical action. A *topos* of classical rhetoric can, in fact, be traced back to the Homeric hero, Ajax. In the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus seeks in vain to calm the wrath of Ajax, who had killed himself for not having inherited the arms of his dead friend Achilles: Odysseus approaches him with affectionate greetings, but Ajax does not answer him and, full of rage, turns towards the souls of the other dead (*Odyssey* XI, 543-69). It is to this passage that Longinus refers in the ninth chapter of the treatise *On the Sublime*, when he sees in this condition the "echo of a high sensibility." Pliny the Younger affirms that silence was part of the teaching of rhetoric: "At times it is no less eloquent to be silent than to speak" (*Letters* VII, 6, 7) ("Non minus interdum oratorium est tacere quam dicere"). This rhetorical tradition, no less than the mystical one, has developed over thousands of years and intersects with the art of mime, the language of face and gestures, that is: the pragmatic aspect of semiotics. A true compendium of this problematic is the volume by Abbott Joseph Dinouart, *L'Art de se taire*, published in 1771. Here, knowing when to be silent is considered as similar to knowing when to speak, for as the first principle of his book states, "there is no need to cease to be silent, except when one has something to say

which is worth more than silence"). Silence is a highly polyvalent condition. In fact, Dinouart distinguishes ten types of silence: there is the "prudent" silence of those who do not wish to jeopardize themselves; the "artificial" silence of those who wish to make others speak without saying anything of themselves, to draw profit from what they have heard and observed; the "courteous" silence of those who listen without contradicting, showing that they feel pleasure at what is being said and accompanying their silence with expressions and gestures which show approval; the "teasing" (*moqueur*) silence of those who do not interrupt, but who think to themselves that the things heard or said are idiocies and who feel a secret pleasure in deceiving the speakers by making them believe they are approved and admired; the "spiritual" silence of those who claim to express pleasant feelings without recourse to words; the "stupid" silence, in which the tongue remains mute because the spirit is insensible and the person seems to have sunk into a taciturn way of being which has nothing to express; "applauding" silence, which consists of giving signs of sincere agreement in front of the person being heard, whether contenting oneself with displaying diligent attention, or showing approval by nodding one's head; a silence of "contempt," in which one does not deign to respond to the speaker, or waits for him to speak so as to display silently coldness and disregard towards what is said; the "capricious" (*d'humeur*) silence of those who depend entirely on their own momentary disposition, liking or disliking what they hear according to whether they feel well or ill, opening their mouths only to make jokes or say things which commit them to nothing; finally, there exists the "political" silence — which Dinouart seems to appreciate most highly — of those who proceed with circumspection, not saying all that they think, not entirely explaining their conduct or purposes, and without betraying the rights of truth, occasionally avoiding expressing themselves clearly so that they are not found out. These ten types of rhetorical silence are analyzed and developed in Dinouart's treatise, from which it is useful to mention the three fundamental observations, more valid than ever with regard to mass media communication today: we speak and write too much, we speak and write badly, we neither speak nor write enough (naturally in the sense that we neither say nor write that which it is necessary to say and write). Thus neither can rhetorical silence be considered ambiguous in the strict sense, but nor is its polyvalence as absolute as that of mystical silence. According to Dinouart, silence can have ten meanings, rather than infinite meanings.

We have seen how in the first half of the twentieth century ambiguity tends towards meaning polyvalence. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, postmodern deconstruction widens the legitimacy of the interpretation of texts and behavior to excess, and as a result produces that disease of communication which Umberto Eco defined with the expression "hermetic semiosis": the mystical and rhetorical lines flow into each other, with the result that ambiguity transforms from polyvalence (or the open work, according to the notion elaborated by Eco in the book of that title) into the annihilation of any communicative power. Eco's *The Limits of Interpretation* contains a concise and timely criticism of "hermetic semiosis." For Eco it is an unhealthy form of communication, the inauspicious influence of which extends over millennia, from Hellenistic Hermeticism to Romanticism, from the Renaissance to deconstruction. The point of departure of hermetic semiosis can be traced to Hellenistic syncretism, according to which many things can be true in the same moment even though they may contradict each other, but if they do contradict each other then they contain a secret message and say things other than what they appear to say. Since, however, everything has relations of analogy, continuity, and resemblance with all other things, any certainty will be inadequate: scarcely have we discovered that there is a privileged meaning than we are certain it is not the true one. Hermetic semiosis thus loops into an infinite process of interpretation which can never be halted. Moreover, hermetic syncretism does not encourage an attitude of humility amongst its followers: on the contrary, since it distrusts all certainties, it creates a void which is filled by the presumption of possessing the secret of the world; the fact that this secret is inexpressible protects the disciple of hermetic esotericism from all checks and controls, and reinforces his arrogance.

For Eco, even if the world were a labyrinth, we could not move through it without respecting certain compulsory paths. Ambiguous messages and texts can have many meanings, but not *all* meanings! We do not have the right to say that the message can mean anything: there is one sense to a text, or there are many, but we cannot say that there is none, or that all are equally good. For this reason Eco's attention is focused neither on the *intentio auctoris* (what the author wishes to say) nor

on the *intentio lectoris* (what the reader reads in the text): the former is too limited, the second too arbitrary. What is important is the *intentio operis*: in other words, there exist certain rights of the text, which should not be cancelled out by hermetic uncertainty and which end by coinciding with the cause of philosophy, whose discourse respects procedural order. *omnis determinatio est negatio*, said Spinoza (in a letter to J. Jellis, 1674; Spinoza, *Correspondence*). Hermetic silence is semantically and strategically inefficient. It is evident that in its rhetorical aspect silence is rendered completely mundane and is stripped of the profoundly spiritual characteristics that we found in the first type of silence, mystical silence. There exists, however, a third tendency which also has two thousand years of history behind it, and whose conception cannot be connected exclusively to contemplation or to action. This third type of silence does not belong entirely to spirituality or to worldly matters: it is, so to speak, between the two. It construes itself as a way of being that can only be expressed through the use of an oxymoron; active contemplation or contemplative activity; interested disinterest or symbolic economy.

The first example once again harks back to classical antiquity and concerns the so-called mysteries of Eleusis, the meaning of which is debated amongst historians of religion even today. Given that men and women of all conditions and nations had themselves initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries for centuries, it is truly strange that the nature of those secrets has remained unknown until today. The most widely accepted theory is that the silence surrounding this mystery stems from the fact that it contained nothing that could be expressed in words; but this ineffability, as Erwin Rohde argued in his *Psyche*, is essentially different from mysticism, considered as a union with the divine: the mysticism in Ancient Greece was Orphism, not the Eleusinian mysteries. The initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries did not entail a change as radical as a conversion (*metánoia*), or entry into a community, or the adhesion to any doctrine, or the learning of any sacred rites which could be repeated elsewhere, much less the participation in any sect or the duty to proselytize: each man returned to his country and continued to do what he did before, believing in what he believed before. "It was characteristic of the Eleusinian mysteries that at the end of the ceremonies the initiates all returned to their own cities to take up entirely, that is, as much in legal as in religious terms, their own place in the world once more" (Sabbatucci 133). What, then, was the function of the mysteries? To offer a very approximate explanation, it could have been the recognition of the human condition, which is mortal and subject to a thousand accidents and circumstances: in other words, the initiate knows that it is "well to die" (Sabbatucci 158), he is reconciled to the situation in which he finds himself and to that which the future holds for him, whatever that may be. Others who have not been to Eleusis, meanwhile, live and die without this knowledge. The experience of the Eleusinian silence, therefore, is beyond contemplation and action, in the sense that the initiate passes from the same to the same, but not from the identical to the identical. Everything remains as it was, but nothing is as it was. This is the greatest ambiguity, and it remains markedly dual.

Moving from religion to philosophy, something similar is found in the *epoché* of the sceptics and the stoics, that is, in the entry into a condition of suspension, arrest, interruption, a break in matters of belief and habit, which does not, however, impede the unfolding of everyday life. The success this word has had in contemporary philosophy, thanks to Edmund Husserl and phenomenology, shows that it is by no means a mere curiosity. There exists an "epochal" silence, which does not impede action, but which seeks to complete it in a detached way, as though we do not belong to it intimately. The type of sensibility which underpins this way of being underwent great development between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, precisely because the mentality of that epoch was profoundly influenced by the study of the Roman philosophers (particularly Cicero and Seneca). Of particular interest are the observations on silence made by Blaise Pascal and Baltasar Gracián, for – despite having opposing tonalities (those of the former have a spiritual orientation, of the latter a mundane one) – they remain absolute in their respective spheres. They describe a third type of silence which is neither mystical nor rhetorical; of both we could say that they are *contemplative in action*.

In a text attributed to Pascal entitled *Discours sur les passions de l'amour*, we find these words: "In love silence is of greater worth than discourse. It is well to be mute; there is an eloquence in silence which penetrates more deeply than language ever could. A lover may well persuade his mistress by remaining silent, though in other circumstances he may be a man of wit! Whatever vivacity one

may have, it is well that at certain times it should be extinguished. All this takes place without rules or reflection; and when the mind acts in this way, it has given it no thought beforehand. It comes about by necessity" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Ell and Stephens) ("En amour un silence vaut mieux qu'un langage. Il est bon d'être interdit; il y a une éloquence de silence qui pénètre plus que la langue ne sauroit faire. Qu'un amant persuade bien sa maîtresse quand il est interdit, et que d'ailleurs il a de l'esprit ! Quelque vivacité que l'on ait, il est bon dans certaines rencontres qu'elle s'éteigne. Tout cela se passe sans règle et sans réflexion; et quand l'esprit le fait, il n'y pensoit pas auparavant. C'est par nécessité que cela arrive" [Pascal qtd. in Cousin 494]). These words are possessed of such an *esprit de finesse* that they seem as though they must have been written in mystical silence, for all that they still propose a practical purpose: love, this text reveals, requires a life of action which explodes into new events. In fact seduction is a form of action *par excellence*, but how different it is from rhetoric! To persuade is not to issue forth propaganda! To refrain from speech is precisely to engage in an ambiguous and suspended action which is simultaneously spiritual and mundane: "In love one dares not take risks, for fear of losing all; yet one must advance, but who can say how far?" ("Dans l'amour on n'ose hasarder parce que l'on craint de tout perdre; il fait pourtant avancer, mais qui peut dire jusques où?" [Pascal qtd. in Cousin 494]).

The other great theorist of the seventeenth century to address this third type of ambiguous silence is the Spanish Jesuit, Baltasar Gracián. In his work the balance seems to lean entirely towards the mundane dimension, towards a pragmatics of silence, guided by prudence and by high style. In the ideal conduct that he explores, silence plays a very important role. In his best known work, the 1648 *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*, composed of three hundred aphorisms which constitute a *vademecum* of *savoir vivre*, silence is just as important as words, for one must "conduct oneself with one's temperament suspended" and escape from dull clarity: "thoughtful silence is the sanctuary of wisdom" ("es el recatado silencio sagrado de la cordura" [§3]). We should not speak about that which we can do without speaking. "Neither in the talk in the square can we know a wise man, since in that place he does not speak with his own voice, but with that of common ignorance ... He retreats into the sanctuary of his silence, and if he shows himself from time to time it is in the circle of the few and the wise" (§43) ("Ni por el hablar en la plaza se ha de sacar el sabio, pues no habla allí con su voz, sino con la de la necesidad común ... Retírase a sagrado de su silencio, y si tal vez se permite, es a sombra de pocos y cuerdos" [§43]). This does not mean, however, that we should withdraw from the world, since to live like this is "to live practically" ("vivir a lo plástico" [§120]), to persevere in the undertakings one has begun and to be resolute, for "matters are not spoiled as much when they run as when they stand still" ("No se gastan tanto las materias cuando corren como si estancan" [§72]). But action in Gracián is for the most part made of waiting and silence: "prudent delay sharpens resolution and makes secrets mature" ("la detención prudente sazona los aciertes y madura los secretos" [§55]). In other words, rhetorical shrewdness — which Gracián calls *malitia* — is of no use unless it is sustained by unceasing work on the self, from the tranquility of the soul to the art of being happy (§21). Gracián is the great master of a mentality that is at once monastic and political, sacred and profane, spiritual and functional, theoretical and practical, cloistered and worldly.

It is surprising that it should be this style of ambiguous thought, so rooted in classical antiquity, which permeates that contemporary philosophy that goes beyond the opposition between contemplation and action, between spirituality and worldliness. We find it again in the five founding fathers of contemporary rationality: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. It was Marx who drew the comparison between revolution and the old mole that digs silently through the depths of society, to emerge suddenly, unexpectedly and unpredictably. And here I can do no less than recall that passage from Karl Marx, *Der 18. Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, which for decades has constituted one of the principal sources of consolation for all the heterodox tendencies of communism. In this passage Marx compares the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century, in which people and things seemed to be illuminated by fireworks and to pass tempestuously from success to success, with proletarian revolutions, which at every moment interrupt their apparent course until they create a situation in which any backward step is made impossible. The former are deafening, but ephemeral, the latter silent, but irreversible. As for Friedrich Nietzsche, effective silence is construed using the metaphor of high noon, the silent hour of Pan, in which all becoming seems suspended, a moment without time in

which the decisive event occurs. And, in *Götzen-Dämmerung*, Nietzsche affirms that our unique experiences are those free of chatter, because we are, in fact, already well beyond those things for which we have words.

With Sigmund Freud, effective silence becomes the protagonist of the life of the psyche *par excellence*. The unconscious is mute by definition, although it is the motor — and therefore the area of greatest effectuality — of every psychological event. It speaks only through those formations of compromise that are dreams, neurotic symptoms, slips, witty remarks, forgetfulness... With Freud an entirely new mechanism of intelligibility comes into being, which lies beyond the opposition of words and silence. There is an abundance, and therefore an exaggeration, of verbal and behavioral manifestations, which mean neither what they say nor what they intentionally hide, because they are the result of a compromise between forces within the psyche in conflict among themselves. It is as though an invisible and silent war is unfolding within us, of which we see only incomprehensible results — without the interpretation provided by analysis. A new form of representation is born, which has its own autonomy with respect to that which it represents, because it is made by both the silence of the unconscious system and the words of the preconscious-conscious system, while also distorting and misrepresenting them.

In Wittgenstein and in Heidegger the notion of silence becomes an explicit theme. Of the former, everyone remembers the phrase which concludes the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* ("About that of which one cannot speak, one must be silent" ("Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen")); in the work of the latter, the idea that language is founded on silence returns constantly and finds in the experience of listening and abandonment (*Gelassenheit*) its conceptual underpinning. As has been widely noted, these affirmations have given rise to a profusion of commentaries, many of which underline their exclusively contemplative, even mystical tonality. I do not completely share this interpretation and I think that neither Wittgenstein nor Heidegger can be reduced to a kind of renunciatory neo-Platonism. In the case of Wittgenstein, his search is constantly oriented towards a way of feeling that is different from one that is subjectivistic and mentalistic when approaching introspection, or from one that is behavioristic and positivistic and which bases itself only on what is objectively observable; the famous phrase should be understood to mean that the inexpressible is contained in that which is uttered. As for Heidegger, I have no doubt that his thought is directed towards a horizon that is stronger (and not weaker) than neo-Platonism on the one hand and political ideology on the other.

I now turn to the central question of my argumentation: is it by chance that the five founding fathers of contemporary intelligibility attribute to that which is silent and obscure a power that belongs neither to the realm of the pure spirit nor to worldly rhetoric? That, in other words, they reject both the monastic, ineffectual, and contemplative path, and also the political, ideological, and spectacular one? The trust that rationality can triumph in the world, as though on a stage on which the curtain has opened, permeates idealism and positivism and their twentieth-century adherents: but this trust is nothing other than ingenuousness. The founding fathers of contemporary intelligibility take for granted that thought, rationality, and ethics have been completely left out of the world-scene in various ways, and that their place has been taken by ideology, by false conscience, by rhetoric, by the desire for power, by spectacle, by new ignorance; but instead of closing themselves in a contemplative and renunciatory way of being, they present a challenge of unexampled proportions, proposing something ambiguous, silent, obscure, and subterranean as the true motor of reality. For Marx this is the class struggle, for Nietzsche the absence of action, for Freud the unconscious, for Wittgenstein linguistic usage, for Heidegger the calm receptivity to the world of things. In short, they take for granted the politico-social destitution of reason (and also, therefore, the possibility that it can exercise a true ethical-pedagogical influence in the West). Their legacy is precious and irreplaceable as never before in this age of globalized communication, and naturally it addresses itself to those few who succeed in not becoming stultified by the din that envelops us all. This legacy teaches us that we should not let ourselves be intimidated by the arrogance and presumption of those who happen to have their turn in power.

In the final thirty years of the last century philosophy claimed to be competing with the media. The so-called French Theory, that is, the exportation of French philosophy to the United States, which



guaranteed it worldwide success, was indeed the transformation of philosophers into stars of the media circus. This trend has shown itself to be a failure, one which was also a personal, existential failure for most of its principal figures. The media circus of today once again needs ideologues, in the sense that it needs effective thinkers (it does not matter if they are bellicose or pacifistic, from the right or the left, spiritualistic or scientific), so that we can believe that these polarities still have meaning. The duty of the humanities, by contrast, is to underline the ambiguous and enigmatic character of knowledge and power.

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