

THOUGHT AND ITS OUTSIDE¹

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Abstract

The topic of this essay is the relation between philosophy and its outside. This ‘its’ has at least three meanings: outside from philosophy, outside into philosophy and outside of philosophy, up to the most extreme meaning of philosophy as the space of the outside. Placing myself on the margin that joins and disjoins them, I am going to refer essentially to three vectors, two of which are already classics to some extent, while another, more recent one, is awaiting further development. The thinkers I refer overall are Foucault, Deleuze and Nietzsche.

Keywords: thought, outside, Foucault, Deleuze, Nietzsche.

1. The topic of this essay is the relation between philosophy and its outside. This ‘its’ has at least three meanings: outside *from* philosophy, outside *into* philosophy and outside *of* philosophy, up to the most extreme meaning of philosophy as the space of the outside. Without being able to establish a clear limit between them—and, actually, placing myself on the margin that joins and disjoins them—I shall refer essentially to three vectors, two of which are already classics to some extent, while another, more recent one, is awaiting further development.¹

From any point from which we may look on our contemporary situation—on the sphere of power, as well as of knowledge, on the social dynamic as well as on the depth of material life—the issue of the outside has established itself at the crossroads between all paths. The very disciplines which are artificially separated by present-day devices of control and evaluation, actually progress due to their reciprocal contamination. It is not by chance that paradigm shifts within each of them are always produced by the encounter, or the clash, with another language, which forces their lexical limits from the outside and modifies their status. Concerning the relation between knowledge and power, in his celebrated Dedication of *The*

¹For an initial summary of this line of research, see my recent book *Da fuori. Una filosofia per l'Europa*. Turin: Einaudi, 2016.

Prince, Machiavelli already argued that just as those who sketch landscapes place themselves down in the plain to consider the nature of mountains and high places and to consider the nature of low places they place themselves high atop mountains, similarly, to know well the nature of peoples one needs to be a prince, and to know well the nature of princes one needs to be the people.²

The light of knowledge that illuminates the inside —we may translate thus Machiavelli’s words— always comes from the outside, never the other way round.

The first reflection on this topic began with Foucault’s essay *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside*, published in the review ‘Critique’ in 1966, and later included in his *Écrits*.³ Through a close confrontation with the other great thinker of the *dehors*, Maurice Blanchot,⁴ he locates the lines of the outside on the border between philosophy and literature, separated from each other by a fundamental difference. Whereas for literature the relation with the ‘outside’ is constitutive, for philosophy this is a much more problematic relation as well as one which has not yet been considered substantially. It is true that the literary language seems to wrap around itself through an inner duplication that entails the designa-

tion of nothing other than itself —of becoming the same as its sentences, so that, for example, the proposition ‘I speak’ is absolutely the same as this other one: ‘I say that I speak’. There is no semantic gap between them concerning both the object that is spoken of and the subject that speaks. But the result of this wrapping of the word around itself, that seems to empower the subject of the discourse, actually produces its depletion, until it cancels its very stamp:

Literature is not language approaching itself until it reaches the point of its fiery manifestation; it is rather language getting as far away from itself as possible. And if, in this setting “outside of itself”, it unveils its own being, the sudden clarity reveals not a folding back but a gap, not a turning back of signs upon themselves but a dispersion. The “subject” of literature (what speaks in it and what it speaks about) is less language in its positivity than the void language takes as its space when it articulates itself in the nakedness of ‘I speak’.⁵

Enclosed in its literary self-referentiality, the sentence ‘I speak’ takes up the entire horizon of the speakable, dissolving everything that remains outside —context, objects, subjects. After all, in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explained it as follows: unlike prepositions and phrases, that recall a subject with the power of inaugurating a discourse, the sentence takes roots in the anonymous being of language, preventing any ‘I’ from taking the word.⁶

²N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated and with an Introduction by H. C. Mansfield. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 4.

³M. Foucault, *Le pensée du dehors*, in : *Écrits*, vol. I. Paris: Gallimard 1994) (Eng. trans.: *Maurice Blanchot: The thought from Outside*, in: *Foucault, Blanchot*, trans. by B. Massumi and J. Mehlman. New York, Zone Books, 1987), pp. 7-60.

⁴Cf. G. Preli, *La force du dehors. Extériorité, limite et non-pouvoir à partir de Maurice Blanchot*. Paris: Recherches, 1977.

⁵M. Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot*, op. cit., p.12.

⁶Cf. M. Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969, (Eng. trans.: *The Archeology of*