



Marcello Ghilardi, *Il vuoto, le forme, l'altro. Tra oriente e occidentale*

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Marcello Ghilardi, Associate Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Padua, published *Emptiness, Form, Otherness (Il vuoto, le forme, l'altro)* in late 2014. The work under review here is a second revised and expanded edition, which, among other things, adds 6 pictorial tables to illustrate the artistic examples mentioned in the book. The work is divided into 9 chapters and 6 Excursus included at the beginning and at the end of each part. In all, we have a total of 544 pages of meticulous description and suggestive readings of various ongoing philosophical issues. The work closes with a helpful index of names and a glossary of terms critical to Ghilardi's philosophical approach.

The author draws on various philosophical and literary sources from classical ancient Greek, Chinese, and Japanese traditions to contemporary reflections on ethics and aesthetics. The text is composed in elegant prose that is never pretentious and avoids superficial summarizing. It intertwines a number of literary genres from a collection of poems (*Book of Odes*) to mythical tales (Orpheus and Eurydice), religious treatises (Meister Eckart, David Maria Turolto), philosophical essays from various cultures (Laozi, Zhuangzi, Dogen, Merleau-Ponty), historical narrations (Herodotus, Thucydides, Sima Qian, *Kojiki* 古事記 [*Record of Ancient Matters*]), and literary novels (Borges, Camus, Kafka, Pavese, Calvino, *Journey to the West*), as well as as well as examples drawn from various artists (Giacometti, Cézanne, Bill Viola, Shitao, Claudio Parmiggiani, Teshū Yamaoka)—all combined in a complex and rich unity that shows the strengths and weaknesses of each position even as it combined them in an original constellation of the author's own thinking.

Important philosophical influences and authors referenced in Ghilardi's include classical Chinese collections (*Daodajing* 道德經), traditional Zen treatises (Heart Sutra, Essay on the Golden Lion), German philosophy (Hegel, Schelling, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Schmitt, Habermas), twentieth-century French philosophy (Derrida, Blanchot, Sartre, Weil, Ricoeur, Kojève, Baudrillard, Jullien), contemporary Italian philosophy (Melandri, Agamben, Cacciari, Recalcati), psychology (Freud, Sacks), and modern Asian thought (Nishida, Cheng, Ueda, Kimura, Azumi).

More than a work of interpretation, Ghilardi's thought passes through different philosophical currents and seeks to place them in an original structure, which in

turn elicits novel approaches to ancient questions. Ghilardi manages to interweave divergent ideas from different cultures and times without favoring one over the other, without identifying his thought with any of them, and without crystallizing his thinking in a single final form but subtly critical of any substantialism that “the ὑβρις of philosophers is to want to retain in the word the truth of the formless” (page 506). Ghilardi’s work is also rich with examples taken from disparate fields like translation, soccer, nautical science, electronic calculation media, sensations, art, Zen practices, gestures, and everyday life.

In my view, the primary purpose of Ghilardi’s inquiry is to explore the ground on which philosophy is moving today and to suggest lines of research that may contribute to the development of contemporary philosophy. He seeks to show how unsuccessful and disastrous it is to flatten out differences necessary to bring life to thinking. His efforts further show that

every human being is “individuated” by a particularity of body and thoughts, of emotions and sentiments, despite an openness to the alterity in the discrepancy and diffraction of the gesture. Accentuating relationality to the point that the peculiarity of the unique and distinct dimension of personal identification has been forgotten or cancelled would be a mistake so terrible as to assume a singularity completely separated and split from alterity. The body offers itself as an *implex* of this double movement, centripetal and centrifugal, that considers subjectivity as both inside and outside itself. (page 481)

He investigates modalities of access to phenomena, or in general to the world, reinterpreting “distance” (between, *ma* 間) or “otherness” and emphasizing the role of emptiness, absence, and the invisible in the process of (linguistic) signification. Taking the circular movement of breath to show how we cannot distinguish inside from outside, Ghilardi notes, “Perhaps we are never merely where we are” and “all these pages are nothing more than a lengthy commentary on that claim” (page 311). He does not assign priority to the search for pure origins, which he considers an artificial operation removing contingencies. The paradigm of the breath articulates the communicative power in heterogeneous relationships as an ongoing interference of alterities, presence, and absence, and thus provides a model for thinking about the self as a practice of interculturality. Underscoring differences does not entail incommunicability among cultures but rather reactivates hidden potentialities that come to light through contact with the resources and specificities of the other. Ghilardi’s book respects the plurality of orient and occident by exploring experience of the limit and the porosity of the boundaries between identity and alterity. He pursues this ambitious task cautiously, demonstrating the seriousness of his philosophical project as a performance of the very theoretical principle he is writing about.

In the introduction he lays out the terms central to his approach in order accurately to question the role and the operating principles of philosophy in its current crisis of identity and academic investiture. Notions like limit, boundary, threshold, relation, contacts and distances, temporality, form, body, emptiness, analogy, intersection, and the tension between identity and alterity reflect this concern. Ghilardi begins by focusing his discussion on three main topics corresponding to the three parts of the word: the relation between word and thing, the relation between senses and perception, and, finally, the relation between absence and alterity.

The first part opens with an *Excursus* characterizing the threshold of philosophy as unbound to precise identities:

The road, the path, begins paradoxically only from the feeling of being lost together with the desire to find a way home. The “play” of philosophy lies in this tension and in the ability, which needs to be supported and stimulated, to live distance, to live on the boundary that separates and unifies the instances of identity and an opposing alterity that disturbs that identity, between the need to match words with their objects and the irreducible distance opening up again and again between sign and thing. The more thinking is able to withstand the tension between the need for identification and the no less important need for alteration or de-identification, the more it can embrace a view of the world. To think philosophically means neither to yield to the temptation of the ultimate resolving word, which freezes all further movement, nor to yield to the opposite temptation of abandoning the word and enclosing oneself in silence. Philosophizing means rather continuously opening a path that preserves the tension between the “things themselves” to be reached and the signs that express them, seeking to translate them into language. (page 20)

The first chapter, “Word and Alterity,” recalls the beginning of philosophy in wonder (*θαῦμα*) as a perturbing and marvelous encounter of the subject with the world, where the practice of philosophy consists in reintroducing alterity to an identity that aims to take up an absolute position. This encounter takes place in a subject embedded in the world (with Merleau-Ponty’s “I-World”): the doorway in this encounter between the subject and the world is the body, highlighting an ontological chiasm incapable of overcoming the opposition in a final dialectic synthesis. In this world there are no given facts, only lived experiences. It is precisely because of this bilateral incidence between I and world that world can never be a mere construct:

The philosophizing self is the locus of an infinite diffraction, a manifold traversed with fault lines; it is anything but monolithic and autonomous. We cannot address the other if we were not starting from our own perspective with its blind spots, its partial and relative views. One understands the other,

one addresses the other and meets the other only to miss it and misunderstand [*fraintenderlo*] it.... We meet it knowing that we will miss the appointment. It is in this missed coup, in this failure, that the promise of a non-superficial encounter lies. Just as in translation there is no perfect mirroring between the original text and the text in the destination language, everything plays on that “between,” on that balance that marks the ineffable relation defining the texts and bringing about communication. (page 32)

Ghilardi sees this encounter expressed in the Sino-Japanese adversative and conjunctive character *soku* (即), translated variously as “and yet,” “nonetheless,” “namely,” and the German preposition *zu*, “toward.” The philosopher lives in the ambiguity between word and thing, language and perception, in the linguistic game of acquisition and loss transposed in the couple *μῦθος-λόγος*, in the Dionysian figurative and Apollonian proper or rational discourse. Onto-encyclopedic logic tends to exclude every interference on which the metaphorical life of myth relies, as show in the positions of Derrida and Habermas. The experience of the gap is well exemplified by *chora* where “the point is rather to reach the awareness of the situatedness of thinking, of its rootedness in an uncontrollable range of conditioning” (page 56).

At the heart of the second chapter, “Forms of the Metaphorical,” Ghilardi bundles together the techniques of metaphor involved in the transference found in the dynamic of the unveiling and concealment the *translation* of the metaphorical. He compares two different examples of tensions animating this transition: the Greek-European tradition (Aristotle’s poetics and rhetoric) and the Chinese traditions. The Chinese tradition is interesting here because of its organic and relational understanding of the real exemplified in the coupling of the subject-object relationship: they are identified as host and invited guest (主, 客), and seen not as opposites but as complementary, the *basso continuo* of the correlation between natural phenomena and emotions belonging to the same vital stream of *ki* (氣), which implies an intense relation to the senses.

Regarding the first kind of tension, Ghilardi bases his argument on Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics, in which metaphor is possible only in the context of a separation—*μῦθος-λόγος*, universality-singularity—seeking conciliation and consolidation by means of metaphysics, noting that Derrida stresses their consubstantial relationship. In contrast, the Chinese language is highly metaphorical, as Ghilardi exemplifies with the *Book of Odes* (詩經) by drawing attention to the different nuances of the direct exposition of 賦, the comparison of 比, and the evocative 興.

Ghilardi’s attention to the Chinese tradition is no mere exotic fascination. He is interested in the intrinsic constitution of the metaphorical, which, through alterity, activates an exchange, “passing through the other(ness) and mirroring in it” (page 81). In general, the metaphorical exposes us to alterity: we let it pass through us in

many different dimensions in order to allow the emergence of something otherwise taken for granted. The metaphor also reformulates philosophical questions within the same language and culture. In no case is there a doubling of levels in the metaphorical projection, only a continuous recontextualization.

Ghilardi does not neglect the ethical dimension of philosophizing that takes place in the form of encountering the world in the lived experience of phenomena:

Form (形) constitutes not so much a substance as an oscillation between expression in the realm of the sign and its transcendental condition, the empty place, the occurrence of emergence on this side of the sign.... In this perspective, the world is not a sum of things but rather a web of relations. (page 97)

Ghilardi calls this web the “implex” (*implesso*) of dynamical forces, taking as an example the concept of form in *Daodejing* as visible only through its effects.

In the description of these two philosophical streams, Ghilardi distinguishes two kinds of conflictual tension: the first tending to the tragic game of opposition, the second tending to the regulation and dynamic balance of relations. He cites Zhuangzi's examples of the swimmer and the cook in order to illustrate the point that the history of philosophy itself may be seen as a series of variations on the theme of identity.

The third chapter, entitled “The Analogical Dimension,” is closely connected to his discussion of metaphor. The logic of analogy functions by locating the problem of the gap (*scarto*) between things and language, which in turn opens up the question of the medium, namely, the excluded middle that is never neutral or indifferent but actively shapes the relations it supports. Following Gongsun Long's *On Pointing at Things* (指物論), things are said to exist only in the language that names them. Prior to that, they belong to another practical order. Words and things co-institute one another other in a positive phenomenological-hermeneutical circularity whose tension is without dichotomy and with no claims to originality, much as if a word were the representation of a scene in miniature.

As with word and thing, the tension between *μῦθος* and *λόγος* is not a schizophrenic duplicity and for this reason there is no need for a synthesis of the two. Because the “decisive result of the analogical practice is the recognition of the aporetic character of all performed analogy” (page 141), one is led to think of the real as inexhaustible. The aim of philosophical discourse is to discipline the distance without canceling it. Ghilardi stresses here that *λόγος* is if not the other of *μῦθος* but rather the void or gap that separates the two and makes them what they are. What really matters is the transition and the interference that marks their relationship. As an example of a strongly oriented *λόγος* approach, Ghilardi mentions Severino's position on the regimentation of being by *λόγος* as a characteristic concern of the

Western world. Even without forgetting a certain variation on Severino's discourse, his argument sets implicitly the problem of a monistic interpretation of λόγος and poses the risk of a *petitio principii*. On the contrary, because of the attention given to natural transformations and maturation rhythms in China, a univocal approach to the question of truth is not to be found.

Following the principles of the Kegon school, Ghilardi compares this dialectical tension to that between the structuring principle 理 and the multiplicity of form in reality, 事. Unlike Hegel's hypostatizing dialectic, the opposing elements do not obstruct each other but maintain the openness of an aporetic and partial synthesis. This is the argument of the fourth chapter, "Toward the Symbol," introduced with the image of Indra's Net from the *Essay on the Golden Lion* (金獅子章) by Fazang. Ghilardi sees other similarities between Hegel's method and the Yogācāra dialectic, although in the latter, despite the common operative dimension, the dialectical process is not resolved through a higher state in which the opposites are gathered up into a substantial third.

Numerous classical Buddhist schools stress the need to assume a detached relationship with things and world as well as a flexible understanding of the relationship between things. This is exactly the kind of relation opened up by the symbol in virtue of its constitutive emptiness: emptiness does not appear before the signs that reveal it and thus always surpasses them. Metaphorical, analogical, or symbolic identity, more than substance, discloses itself as a movement and as the locus of transition: "Every position, every picture is a place of transition, not final forms hardening the movement it seeks to witness" (page 182). Echoing Heidegger, whose interpretation of λέγειν reflects more of the gathering and safeguarding than of the contrastive tension between opposing elements: "Philosophers have to remain indigent. Their word is *Spannung*, the tension that motivates, agitates, and troubles them but is also an opportunity to demonstrate their willingness for the truth" (page 185).

Ghilardi's argument draws on the use of the copula (is, is not) and its alternatives of situation and spontaneity (自然 μῆτις). The character 即 from the Heart Sūtra enriches the argument by drawing the discussion away from a dual understanding of the logic of thing and word, 理 and 事, being and not-being. Ghilardi compares the respective emphasis of Nishida and Dōgen on the medial role of relations that results from functioning as a threshold: "*Soku* serves as an operator that converts the contradiction in relation" (page 197). Other supporting points for his argumentation are found in the rhetorical figure of hendiadys, Borge's *Tlön* language without substantives, and Ueda's "I" as the place of experience. Ghilardi does not overlook the symbolic quality of maintaining the elements in relation to one another by not allowing them to be dissolved. Nor does he ignore

the hard work of coming to terms with the heterotopy involved in intercultural thinking or even linguistic diversity within a given culture.

Excursus 2 and 3 form a bridge between the first and second parts of the book, the one taking up the relation between philosophical discourse and narrative text, and the other introducing the figure of Orpheus to illustrate the relationship between sight and touch.

The second part opens with a fifth chapter on the “Analogy of the Invisible,” which deals with the asymmetrical duplicity of the visible and the invisible in the context of *μῦθος*. Ghilardi compares the logic of myth to the logic of breathing, signalling the repetition in the narration of the myth and the blending of a defined origin in connection with Ōmori Shōzō’s idea of 立ち現れ, “emergence and manifestation.” Ghilardi focuses on the myth of look and distance by pivoting his discussion on Orpheus and Eurydice, and the figures of Izanagi and Izanami in the *Kojiki*. In this connection, he also alludes to Euripide’s *Alcestitis*, Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, Virgil’s *Georgics*, Bible, Rilke’s sonnets, Marina Cvetaeva, Cesare Pavese, and Italo Calvino. Orpheus and Izanagi are each prohibited from seeking their beloved, Eurydice and Izanami, until she is in the shadows of the netherworld lest they lose her forever. This *transgression* distinguishes Orpheus’s case from that of Narcissus: it is a tactile-visual distancing set in the flexible rhetoric of *ἑωπία*. Eurydice cannot be objectified and her visibility preserves the openness to the invisible in an extreme form of loyalty to the abandonment: “The work of the word is the transposition of the invisible in the forms that verbalize it, and vice versa, it is at the same time a transposition of visible phenomena in the invisibility of the concept” (page 292).

In the sixth chapter, “Work and Trace,” the dynamic of visible-invisible is expressed in terms of the interaction between emptiness and form. Ghilardi exemplifies this relational awareness in the way an artist’s gaze wanders from the model to the blank paper and back again in order to gain a new perspective. Another aspect of this relation for Ghilardi is exemplified in the *kendō* (剣道) term 間合い, a “relation in the distance” that represents an encounter that requires a certain distance to take place. The role of absence brings about a transformation of visual perception, paradigmatically represented as the possibility of being absent to oneself: “Without distance there is neither stroke nor writing” (page 292). The trace “indicates the emptying of ontology by the background and the origin” (page 310). In the aesthetic of traces, which Ghilardi links with the Dao, the work that is being done is “the form of an emptiness” (page 302) destined to undergo continuous transformation, and the indispensable act of looking away marks an awareness of a certain blindness that arises together with sight: “By accepting the loss of direct vision we mature to a different awareness of the eye and the look” (page 305). Famous examples cited are those of Tiresias, Oedipus, Homer, Milton, Borges, as well as the figures of the poet,

the lover, and the prophet who see things differently. Also mentioned are Rilke and Blanchot, who describe the role of trace in the extreme case of the relationship to death. In addition, Ghilardi mentions the work of Giacometti, the movie *Bis ans Ende der Welt* (1991), and the video-art of Bill Viola—each of them calling into question Hegel's conception of the neutrality of the look and reconfirming Derrida's remark on the need for light.

In the seventh chapter, "The Transformation of Work," Ghilardi takes up the ethic and aesthetic in Daoist painting and writing. Instead of registering presence, Daoists paintings of mountains, seas, and rivers draw more attention to the movements of the brush that track the creative process than to the final image that emerges. Through the strokes of the brush, "the painter, the sage, knows to locate himself at the intersection between the visible and the invisible" (page 326). The aim is to recover an original spontaneity through the movement of loss and reconstruction in a pure action of non-action (無爲), which is where Ghilardi sees the operational meaning of emptiness and the expressive form of the living gesture. As he shows in the case of Cézanne and Monet, at the end of the work we ourselves flow with the mountain, rather like what Rilke called *Dingwerdung*. Through this transition, seeing is trained synesthetically to living in combined presence of opposites: "There is no primacy of the eye and the seeing in pictorial or calligraphic experience. Other systems of coherence and modalities of access to the landscape and the signs of the world are at play" (page 343). Ghilardi demonstrates the point with the example of the painter Shitao and his technique of unique traits (一画). Following Sartre, Ghilardi argues that every element is the result of an exchange of looks. "What matters in the experience of the visible is the place that is becoming and the rhythm of a network of invisible correspondences" (page 354) and the corporeality of the look. At the end of the chapter, Ghilardi counterposes the categories of εἰδωλον as an image of strong identity and εἰκὼν as a non-reified image, citing works such as *Pine Trees* (『松林図』) by Hasegawa Tōhaku and *Shadow Sculptures* (*Sculture d'ombra*) by Claudio Parmigiani.

A fourth Excursus summarizes and condenses the need to educate seeing so as to gain a peripheral view that remains alter to what is happening at the margins without fixating on the need for a totalizing concept. Ghilardi uses the myth of Perseus and Medusa to invite the reader to reflect on the invisible and the inaccessible. In a fifth Excursus, he goes on to stress the double-bind relationship that obtains between background and positioning by recalling the concept of the groundlessness of existence in both Greek and Japanese thought, principally with regard to the idea of time.

The third and final part of *Emptiness, Form, Otherness* comprises two chapters. The first, "History and Praxis," gathers up reflections on general models of writing

history, distinguishing among them by their conceptions of time and their positioning of the human in the universe as absolute or incidental. For Ghilardi, the importance of direct testimony in Herodotus, the view of history as the product of human action in Thucydides, and the metaphysical ideal of history we see in Hegel are typical of the methods of Western narrative. In contrast, Sima Qian's diachronic and cyclical approach to history sees history as the transitory flow of a chain of irregular events, in effect rendering our role in any social or cosmic processes inactive (無為).

Ghilardi advances his argument by employing the rich terminology of ancient Greece and China regarding time (e.g., χρόνος, αἰών, καιρός, 時, 久, and 昔). He attempts to reappropriate the Confucian tradition through a combination of Kant's moral doctrine and the intercultural philosophers Mou Zongsan and Xiong Shili whose early twentieth-century thinking he sees as paradigmatic of the modern Chinese conception of history. On this basis, Ghilardi affirms that

human culture is a continuous self-negating transformation, a coincidence of self-relations and hetero-relations and, at the same time, of a passivity and activity, a receptivity and acting projecting outside itself. The relations between tradition and modernity, between individuality and modernity, between the particular and the universal, are not dissolved but remain dialectically involved in a movement of self-contradiction that is the engine of every cultural expression. (pages 409–10)

Within the frame of globalization, and with the aid of Derrida, Jullien, Kojève and Azuma's *The Animalizing Postmodern* (『動物化するポストモダン: オタクから見た日本社会』), Ghilardi undertakes an analysis of the depersonalized subject as contrasted with the so-called *otaku* generation of modern Japan. This generation represents a specific example of an increasingly pervasive model of behavior that encourages enjoyment and discourages waiting, as well as an emptiness in which

the body of the post-human subject, the body-experience observed by the protagonist of the *otaku* generation, generations immersed in the fragility of the relationship with the self and others no longer provide a place for an ensemble of alterity and intimacy, for chance of encounter with the self and the other but an auto-referential and auto-centered individuality (page 418).

The ninth chapter, "In Waiting," closes the book with the problem of suffering, sickness, and trauma in the phenomenological identity of a subject constantly exposed to contamination, interaction, and impermanence. Ghilardi takes up the question of how to deal with suffering. Based on Greek tragedy and the conception of the divine by Simone Weil, and not wishing to trivialize the potential for real damage, he suggests that suffering can be transformed into a form of knowledge:

“Pain is a form of alterity that dwells in the heart of identity; it is the distance that torments identity in its every exercise of recognition” (page 443).

The central idea here is Sack’s neurological notion of “deficit,” which is characterized not only by loss but also by the acquisition, of something that changes the overall structure of perception in the direction of a reintegration or an adjustment to different conditions, as we see in the art of Cézanne. Ghilardi suggests the mutuality of a gesture of caress as a symbol of this synesthetic encounter with alterity:

Proximity and distance, encounter and distinction, are together here; there is unity in division. The caress is contact without incorporation, a reduction of the other to the same. In the experience of the caress, we are between the one and the two, neither one nor two. (page 461)

In narratives of λόγος, despite the formative and therapeutic functions of language, there is always something unavailable. The role of philosophy is to draw attention to the delicate or overlooked presence of the invisible. For Ghilardi, this is something to be cultivated with care. In this regard, he sees in bioethics an urgent call to balance the medical with religious experience. Health is not simply the absence of illness, which would render it a new form of attachment. It is rather the ability to take hold of the *εὐκαιρία* (the good opportunity, the propitious moment) and to follow the musical cadence (拍子).

The book draws to a close with a clear invitation in the final Excursus:

We need to think emptiness in its necessary relation with form without entering into a dialectic of being or inserting it into a dialectic with being, understanding it rather as a symbol of what is beyond representation and yet a condition of representability that can be understood only by beginning from images. “Emptiness” is also an image. (page 517)

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