

VINCENZO AGNETTI: STATEMENTS THAT GO BEYOND

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“I only believe in the things that don't exist the rest is contaminated”ⁱ

Before Vincenzo Agnetti, only Laurence Sterne had dared to pass from the linearity of writing to draw diagrams with curved lines, angles and other graphical developments in chapter 40 of Book VI of his novel *Tristram Shandy*. For a couple of centuries this shocking licence that he had taken nevertheless went almost unnoticed or at most was accepted without arousing too many *ifs* or *buts*. However, it was then noted by Luciano Fabro, who grasped all its abnormality, so much so that he actually took out the page and transformed the graphical doodles into a work entitled *C'est la vie* (1986). But when Agnetti conceived and created his *Tesi* (Thesis, 1968-1972) and traced three drawings of broken segments, placing them between announcements of three entities of time, namely proportional time, integral time and derived time, in that gesture one has the clear sensation of being in the presence of an author able to combine every different logic of meaning with the freest associations of the imagination.

That *Thesis* was devised during his travels from Norway to Qatar in Arabia, written between 1968-69 and first promised to his publisher friend Vanni Scheiwiller. Yet this volume, after the novel *Obsoleto* (Obsolete), the second emblematic essay of Agnetti's *Weltanschauung*, would only see the light of day in 1972, printed by another publisher.ⁱⁱ A proud and sharp exaltation of antitetical forms, the work contains many of the statements given form in the “Feltri” (Felts) and “Assiomi” (Axioms) present in this exhibition in Florence. With a mirror-image structure of propositions built on oxymorons, metaphors, paradoxes and metonymias placed underneath + and - signs, it is a verbal organism capable of simultaneously affirming and denying the vast system of propositions devised by the author himself, walking the tightrope of rhetorical forms until the sense collapses.

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- i Vincenzo Agnetti, *Dimentica*, text in the catalogue for the “Opere 1967-1980” exhibition at Galleria Martano, Turin and Galleria Milano, Milan, 21 November 1987 – 6 January 1988, p. 5.
 - ii After first self-publishing ten or so copies, in June 1972 his *Tesi* was published by Giampaolo Prearo of Milan, with a text “Pausa alla lettura” (Pause to Read) by Tommaso Trini, who also edited the “Preariana” series.

Before the *Thesis*, as is well known, Agnetti had tried out his critical poetical discourse on his friends Castellani and Manzoni, and had published *Non commettere atti impuri* (Thou shalt not commit impure acts) in *Azimuth*. Then, like Rimbaud, he had rejected artistic activity by taking himself into exile in South America and devoting himself to electronic automation. But not in vain, since among its other outcomes, the experience would give him the ideas and skills to create the *Macchina drogata* (Drugged Machine), 1968, a calculating tool reworked to produce an almost 'aphasic' poem, and *NEG*, 1979, a device for listening to the negation of sound, that is, the silent pauses in music.

Agnetti's absence from the art scene, in the meantime frequented by his friends, lasted five years, a period that he himself defined as "'liquidationism' in the best of cases 'arte-no'" (Agnetti). In reality, what had caused him to abstain from creating works (while nevertheless compiling two thousand pages of writing in tens of notebooks called *Assenza* - Absence) was his aversion, in that moment of great ideological tensions, to an art synonymous with the production of objects. The thousands of pages that he wrote and never read again form his first and greatest deposit of thoughts, ideas and projects. These would then go on to provide the basic concept of "forgotten by heart" in the poetics of *Obsoleto* (Obsolete, 1967), his first novel. This explorative volume aimed to seek the basis of the dimension of oblivion, of the hidden and of what would even become illegible as he pared down the compositions of leaden clichés for the end pages of the work.

In his formulation of a zero semiotics, Agnetti constructed a brand-new linguistic framework which could only bear comparison with poets like Emilio Villa, musicians like John Cage, and acting machines like Carmelo Bene.

Agnetti decides to replace words – as yet used by deconstructing and removing their sense or, on the contrary, by demonstrating their inexorable ambiguity – with numbers (contrary to the *Drugged Machine*), the result a meaningless monologue rendered by inflections pronounced by an intonation device. This is the point he gets to in *Progetto per un Amleto politico* (Project for a Political Hamlet) 1973, addressing the crowd without a discourse. While for Cage his musical beginnings

were prompted by mathematical systems in his attempt to give Bach's music a structural order, for Agnetti using numbers instead of letters and words seems to be aimed at the ritualities of the theatrical text. And its greatest exponent is Shakespeare, whose absolute life-death dilemma Agnetti resolves in the radical exceptive poetic axiom "to be or not to be", that which his friend Manzoni had similarly considered the categorical imperative for action: "There's nothing to say: there's only to be, to live."ⁱⁱⁱ

In all of Agnetti's poetic action, the emptiness, silence and oblivion that bring the paradox of 'forgotten by heart' to life are always latent or continuing instincts in a discourse that is always contradicted, impronunciabile, derisive. To forget, lose, cancel are infinitive forms conjugated to form the propositions that will be nonsense or nevertheless against common sense. And they are all predicates of memory and time, which play the leading role in Agnetti's dramaturgy. A practitioner of "prior forgetfulness", Agnetti is aware that "Everything is identified and consumed in time".^{iv} The repertoire of his inventions and conceptions comprises a chain of variations on a thought, formulated so that they may always catch themselves out. Thus his works, creations of an author who allows himself to continually go beyond the most astonishing manifestations of theoretical and practical conceptuality – he continually reformulated his intuitions in different visual textual forms – often went in the direction of dematerialisation. At the same time, however, he did not relinquish the work's being, as the exhibition in Florence demonstrates once more.

But sooner or later we will have to get down to tackling and investigating the discourse that floats over his entire oeuvre like a ghost: his poetical commitment to "go beyond culture" (Agnetti), the extreme question as to the "reason for things and gestures",^v focussed on by Agnetti and also pursued by Yves Klein in order to "go beyond art". But neither was given the time.

iii Piero Manzoni, *Libera dimensione*, in *Azimuth 2*, edited by Enrico Castellani and Piero Manzoni, E.P.I. editoriale periodici italiani, Milan, January 1960.

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- iv Vincenzo Agnetti, *Trasduzione e subvalore, proposizione n. 13*, in *Data*, Milan, February 1972, republished in C. and C. d'Afflitto (eds), *Vincenzo Agnetti. Caosualmente un percorso*, catalogue for the exhibition at Galleria Vivita, Florence, April - May 1991, pp. 7-8.
- v Vincenzo Agnetti, *ibid.*