# UNKNOWN TO THOSE WHO KNOW,
## AND KNOWN TO THOSE WHO DO NOT KNOW

*Can't you see the celebration*
*that surrounds you wherever you turn,*
*silent?*

*Look! Everything is open: the secret*
*is revealed everywhere;*
*nothing is hidden, everything is manifest.*
*You only need eyes to see,*
*awareness to read what*
*stands before you.*
*Everywhere,*
*everything is a revealed secret:*
*from the very beginning,*
*nothing has been hidden.*



*Translated by Alberto Gabba*

**Selling Water Next to a River**

I will begin my speech with some words that I often like to quote, the words of the Zen master Harada Sogaku, who at his funeral had a writing hung in calligraphy that summarized his life and his teachings as follows:

*"For forty years I did nothing but selling water next to a river".*

Words that well express the meaning of my speech, in which I will try to explore, on the edge of paradox – a paradox, which in truth, is only apparent – the relationship between truth and mystery.

And the words of our master do sound paradoxical: "*For forty years I did nothing but selling water next to a river*". What could be more paradoxical, useless and senseless than selling water next to a river? Since the water is already there, at our disposal, within our reach. Clearly the master is telling us: look, what you seek in truth is always present. You ask me for what is always with you. You ask me to sell you water, but the water is there.

To make the meaning of the metaphor explicit: Being – or if we want, God, Life – in truth is always present, is manifest in every moment (in the metaphor, the water is always there within our reach). But we are unable to grasp it, busy as we are, among other things – this is a real paradox – looking for it (in looking for water and for someone to sell it to us).

This apologue closely resembles the anecdote of the

Buddha, who one day instead of speaking, simply shows a flower. The disciples remain a little disconcerted, they compete to explain the meaning of the flower, what it symbolizes, what teachings to draw from it; but only one understands, remains silent and smiles…

**Unknown to Those Who Know, and Known to Those Who do not Know**

The Being, the Absolute, God is manifest at every moment, but we are busy looking for it. And we search for it in the forms of the extraordinary and the sensational, composing imaginary geographies, populating them with entities, interpreting the rich symbolism of religious experience in a literal way, transforming experience into beliefs.
Implying that there are privileged accesses to the divine, the divine understood therefore as an experience reserved for a few, who become its exclusive custodians and mediators. And at this time, particularly, there is a swarm of offers (if you go on YouTube you will find everything ...), also because crisis increases demand.

"Unknown to those who know, and known to those who do not know" (Upanishad). Unknown to those who believe, presume, claim to know it, to trace with certainty the maps of the invisible, in a sort of ontological hybris. Known to those who listen, who let Being be, who let Being reveal itself, in the forms of its manifestation.
To know, in this sense, means to listen, to open oneself to the mystery, to let oneself be penetrated, to enter into resonance, to be Being itself. And this involves silence, emptiness, as a condition. Only if one is empty can one have experience of Being, can one have knowledge of it – empty of the presumption of particular contents elevated to absolute knowledge, empty of beliefs.

One of the ways of this manifestation of Being, which I will try to briefly talk about today and which has these characteristics of listening and openness to the mystery, is poetry, poetic language – if we want, more generally, the language of art – understood in Heideggerian terms as a language of Being, through which Being reveals itself to us.

Holderlin's beautiful verse comes to my mind: "*Poetically man dwells on this earth*."

**The Way of Art**

Poetry understood therefore not – or not only – as poetic production in the strict sense, but as a "poetic relationship with the world", or "poetic intuition of the world", as a cognitive path through which Being reveals itself.
Christian Bobin says it very well:

"*Poetry is the only science that does not mistreat its object. Poetry enters the world as into a friendly house, reveals the object, leads it to reveal itself, does not force it. It seems to me that things come to us much more easily if we give them the time they require*".



And again:

"*Moments of contemplation are moments of great respite for the world, because it is in these moments that reality is no longer afraid of reaching us. Things, animals, everything that is in the order of the living approaches us and comes to find its name*".

Poetry (but we could say, art in general) invites us to pause, to stay close to things, giving them time to reveal themselves, not necessarily wanting to do something with them (as is the case with technology, for example). Poetry lingers on the sign, lets it speak, tries to capture its infinite allusive richness, its infinite reserve of meaning. Poetry lingers on the border. One could speak of the "happiness of the signifier".
Without wanting to go beyond or behind things at all costs; and without objectifying them, reducing them to mere facts. Poetry invites us to stay with the mystery.
This being with the mystery does not take anything away from the spiritual experience, rather it strengthens it, makes it richer and deeper. It brings us closer to the truth, more than other languages can do; the language of science for example, if conceived in a reductionist way, or of certain forms of spirituality which, with their literalism, transform experiences into entities and beliefs.

In artistic creation there is a sort of invitation to see better, to take a second look, which allows something deeper to reveal itself (this is why we read poems or look at paintings).
In representing an object in a painting with new colours and lines, in the use of analogical language in a poem, a new attention is created to what is represented: it is as if we saw it more in depth; as if we were really seeing it for the first time, amazed by its presence, grasping deeper and more mysterious relationships.
Poetic language can make us see things because it isolates them from the network of instrumental relations: things are represented unrelated, in a state of suspension, in their pure being, in the miracle of their existence and offering themselves to us; removed from the ordinary gaze, in which they are taken for granted.
We grasp them in their connection with Being, as against the background of Being, of which they are; through direct intuition, which allows them to reveal themselves. And this also reminds us of our own presence, of our pure being, removed from the network of everyday worries (this is also why works of art give us pleasure, because they free us). We understand that first of all, we are being, that there is a deeper, less conditioned, more significant level of our existence.



**Truth and Mystery**

I am coming to the conclusion. This paradox of truth that reveals itself through mystery, therefore in a certain sense through its concealment, this game of veiling/unveiling of Being, we find it developed in a profound and brilliant way in Ibn Arabi, the great Sufi mystic.
Ibn Arabi says:
"There is no veil and there is no curtain. Nothing hides Him except His manifestation.
Nothing is unmanifest: it is the lack of knowledge that makes it so… In other words, what you are looking for in the realm of the unmanifest is manifest."
The divine manifests itself precisely through the "veil", that is, through what appears, what is manifest; and just when we try to go beyond this veil, believing that it is mere appearance, we lose the possibility of knowing it. We lose all the richness and splendour of life, in which Being manifests itself, that Being is.
Everything is manifest. But we behave like a fish that is desperately searching for water, without realizing that it is immersed in it. As our Zen master says:
"*For forty years I did nothing but selling water next to a river.*"

Even in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas we find these words of Jesus:
*Jesus said: "Know what is before you, and what is hidden from you will be revealed to you. For there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed"*
And again, in this short but beautiful dialogue between Jesus and his disciples:
*The disciples asked him, "On what day will the Kingdom come?" (Jesus answered) "It will not come while people are waiting for it. They will not say: "Look, here it is!". Or: "Look, there it is!". Rather, the Kingdom of the Father is spread throughout the earth, and men do not see it".*

**In Praise of the Earth**

I close with a postscript. I think that this sense of mystery, as I have tried to describe it, understood therefore as awareness of the limits of our knowledge but at the same time as a way to an intuition revealing the divine and the sacredness of life... well, I think that this sense of mystery can also help us and inspire us in our living together – especially in a difficult time like the one we are living in – to the extent that it becomes profound respect, reverence towards the world we inhabit. Life as something to be read and preserved rather than to be manipulated (as instead happens in the gaze of technology), love for creation.
The sense of mystery can lead us to humbly consider ourselves creatures, it affords a sense of limit. Not the hybris of manipulative reason, which risks leading us to the destruction of the planet and turning human beings into machines to be exploited; we should rather take care of life, be its custodians.
Perhaps this is also the meaning of our spiritual quest: living to the fullest the mystery of our being here, our fragile, delicate and rich earthliness, and humanity. Also

made of deep and authentic concern for others and for the world, for the splendid garden in which we live.
I close with a "praise of the earth" and its "divine nature". I do so with the words of Herman Hesse, when he tells of Siddhartha who rediscovers the wonder of the world after a period of very hard asceticism:

"He looked around, as though he were seeing the world for the first time. Lovely was the world, colourful was the world, strange and mysterious was the world! Here was blue, here was yellow, here was green, the sky flowed and the river, the forest towered up and the mountains […] Blue was blue, the river was river, and even if the One and the Divine lay hidden in the blue and river, it was still simply the manner of the Divine to be yellow here, blue here, sky there, forest there".

And finally Kabir, the mystic Sufi poet, in these verses taken from one of his poems:
*"O Sadhu, simple union is the best […]*
*With open eyes I look and smile,*
*and admire His beauty everywhere".*

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