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# Garin and Cassirer: Historiography and Philosophy

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**Abstract:** The relation between Garin and Cassirer is still an insufficiently investigated topic, here proposed also in light of their personal connections and documents. This relation represents an important episode in the *Nachwirkung* of Cassirer in Italy. Garin was deeply influenced by Cassirer's historical research and philosophical thought, in the shaping of his own research fields and in the methodological debates about the history of philosophy.

**Keywords:** Cassirer, Eugenio Garin, historiography, history of philosophy

In 2009 and 2010, some academic meetings were organized in Italy to mark the first centenary of Eugenio Garin's birth (1909–2004). At that moment, the relation between Garin and Cassirer was still an insufficiently investigated topic.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it represents an important episode in the *Nachwirkung* of Cassirer in Italy, which from the 1910s to the 1930s was almost entirely confined to his historical works. Cassirer as a philosopher – opposed in particular by Benedetto Croce, and at least initially by Giovanni Gentile – would receive full recognition in Italy only starting in the 1960s, thanks to Antonio Banfi, Remo Cantoni, Giulio Preti, Enzo Paci, Mario Dal Pra, Pietro Piovani and Leo Lugarini.<sup>2</sup>

In *Sessanta anni dopo* (*Sixty Years after*), one of his autobiographical writings, Garin recalled that he first encountered Cassirer's work in 1927, when he was still a student in Florence, at the suggestion of his professor Ludovico Limentani, who had encouraged him to read the Italian translation of Dilthey's *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation* and Cassirer's recently published *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der*

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<sup>1</sup> Previous publications on this topic in Italian are Ricci (2011a, 2011b). Quotes from Italian authors have been translated into English; quotes from Cassirer's works are in the German or English original.

<sup>2</sup> About Cassirer's reception in Italy, see: Centi (1995), Lazzari (1995), Ferrari (1996), and Raio (2002<sup>3</sup>, pp. 191–210).

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*Renaissance*. According to Limentani, these two authors shared a sort of “return to Kant,” and they offered a way out of the theoretical difficulties of positivism, both of them rejecting all forms of naturalism and metaphysical substantialism. Garin then notes that, following the reading of *Individuum and Kosmos*, he continued his study of Cassirer with *Die platonische Renaissance in England und die Schule von Cambridge* (1932). Cassirer’s works clearly urged him to turn his attention also to Nicholas of Cusa, in spite of the fact that, unlike Cassirer, Garin eventually considered Cusa distant equally from Ficino and Pico. He overtly admitted that Cassirer may have contributed to his shift in interests from the English moralists, his main research field until then, towards Cusa and the philosophers of the Italian Renaissance. In Garin’s words: “Right under the influence of Cassirer’s work and out of the reading of Giordano Bruno, I started to pay a special attention to Cusa, who nevertheless seemed to me very far from Ficino and Pico. It would have been very difficult then, and perhaps even more today, to assess to what extent Cassirer’s work weighed on my ‘conversion’ from Shaftesbury to Pico and Ficino [...]. I am, however, indebted to Cassirer for at least one thing: for the conviction, becoming ever more profound through time, of the great weight that certain topics characteristic of the Italian Renaissance would continue to hold at various stages of European culture.”<sup>3</sup>

To 1938 dates back the apparently unique piece of correspondence between Garin and Cassirer, represented by a letter in which Cassirer thanks Garin, on receipt of his recent volume on *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Vita e dottrina*. The German philosopher, then in exile in Sweden, wrote to Garin that he had already read the first two chapters of his book, finding in them “viele wertvolle Bestätigungen für meine eigene Grundauffassung Pico’s,” but also “viele wichtige Erweiterungen meiner Kenntnisse und neue Anregungen,” to the extent that he acknowledged that they would be of great use, when he would resume his studies concerning the Renaissance.<sup>4</sup> In fact, as early as the summer of that same year,

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<sup>3</sup> Garin (1990<sup>2</sup>, pp. 132–133). Quotes from Italian authors have been translated into English, the original Italian text is given in the footnote. “Proprio sotto l’influenza dell’opera del Cassirer e delle letture bruniane, avevo rivolto una particolare attenzione a Cusano, che mi parve tuttavia molto lontano da Ficino e da Pico. Mi sarebbe stato molto difficile allora, e, forse, ancor più oggi, dire in che misura pesò sulla mia ‘conversione’ dal mondo di Shaftesbury a quello di Pico e Ficino la produzione di Cassirer di quegli anni [...]. Di una cosa comunque, mi sento debitore a Cassirer: della convinzione, che si è venuta facendo sempre più profonda, del peso grande che certe tematiche caratteristiche del Rinascimento italiano conservarono a lungo su vari piani della cultura europea.”

<sup>4</sup> The letter is edited in Ricci (2009, p. 476). The manuscript is in the Archivio Garin, Carteggio, Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa (SNSP).

Cassirer returned to work on Pico, writing a long article that appeared in the *Journal of History of Ideas* in 1942, in which he states his appreciation for Garin's work.<sup>5</sup>

Further evidence of the relation between the two authors is found in a much later document, the handwritten notes dated 30 June 1995, in which Garin presents Massimo Ferrari's work *Ernst Cassirer. Dalla scuola di Marburg alla filosofia della cultura*, to the Accademia della 'Colombaria', proposing its publication in the *Studi dell'Accademia*, which would in fact come to pass in the following year. Here, Garin acknowledges Cassirer "as among the most significant and fecund thinkers of this century, and among those with the richest and most suggestive legacy."<sup>6</sup> He adds important information on his early interest in Cassirer, and the role the German philosopher played in the inspiration of his ensuing studies. In particular, he recalls the article on Cassirer published in 1934 by the German exile in Italy, Heinrich Levy, a friend of Limentani and Guido Calogero, in the *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* edited by Gentile, as a sign of the early reception of Cassirer in Italy.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it was around this time that Garin had discussed Cassirer with Levy, in Florence. The cultural milieu of the city was widely interested in Cassirer, as demonstrated by the publication of the Italian edition of several of his books: *Il problema Gian Giacomo Rousseau* (*Das Problem Jean Jacques Rousseau*), at the suggestion of Ernesto Codignola, *Individuo e cosmo* (*Individuum und Kosmos*) and *Filosofia dell'Illuminismo* (*Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*), all of these being published in the 1930s by the Florentine publisher La Nuova Italia. It was also at that time that Giovanni Gentile opened up to Cassirer's thought, thanks to Calogero. In fact, Calogero persuaded Gentile to publish Levy's essay in the *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, and then to participate in the volume *Philosophy and History*, that in 1936 celebrated the 60th anniversary of Cassirer's birth. Gentile was initially suspicious that his participation could be exploited for political aims, but finally, his article about *The transcending of time in history* appeared in that book, which was edited in England, and rapidly circulated in Italy. This episode illustrates Gentile's relative independence from the fascist racial policy, and his respect for his German Jewish colleagues; it also helps to understand the context in which Garin met Cassirer, whose early reception in Italy was fostered in Gentile's circle and by the journal he directed.<sup>8</sup> Gentile was crucial not only for his role in Garin's

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<sup>5</sup> Cassirer (1942).

<sup>6</sup> "Cassirer rimane fra i più significativi e fecondi pensatori di questo secolo, fra coloro la cui eredità è più ricca e suggestiva e questo più di quanto non paia." The section of the handwritten draft of Garin's presentation of Ferrari's book, evocating the former's personal memories of Cassirer's thought circulation in Italy during the Thirties, is edited in Ricci (2009, pp. 476–477). The manuscript, entitled *Colombaria*, is in the Archivio Garin, SNSP, busta 23.

<sup>7</sup> Levy (1934).

<sup>8</sup> Ricci (2009, pp. 460–463).

intellectual experience (beside Croce, for some aspects, and later Antonio Gramsci), but also in the shaping of Garin's interpretation of the philosophy of the Renaissance.<sup>9</sup> Not by chance, in his writings Garin compares Gentile's historiographic or methodological arguments with Cassirer's; the two authors were in a dialogue, in his mind.

In short, Garin sometimes 'corrected' Cassirer, adopting some of Gentile's views, asserting for example the "intrinsic philosophical value" of humanism, and then he 'corrected' Gentile, using Cassirer, in elaborating his own interpretation of the history of philosophy, and his theory of philosophy as historical knowledge ('la filosofia come sapere storico', as the title of his main contribution on the issue of 1959, in which he collected his methodological essays).<sup>10</sup> Cassirer's concept of philosophy as "cultural criticism" was assumed retrospectively by Garin as one of the main inspiring or instrumental 'sources' of his 'philosophy as historic knowledge'. Cassirer offered to him, in the words of Massimo Ferrari, "una esemplare riflessione filosofica tanto sulla cultura quanto sul sapere scientifico, non disgiunta e certamente non in contrapposizione con la filosofia come 'sapere storico'."<sup>11</sup>

In the expanded 1990 edition of *La filosofia come sapere storico*, Garin added his memoir *Sessanta anni dopo*, in which we have seen how strongly he acknowledges his debt to Cassirer's historical works. In the same edition, Garin republished also his essay of 1958 about *Gramsci nella cultura italiana*, in which he pays tribute to Gramsci's "integral historic humanism."<sup>12</sup> Gramsci, who influenced Garin in his "revisione della metodologia storiografica,"<sup>13</sup> assumes fundamental importance precisely in the same context, in which Garin defines Cassirer's "philosophy of symbolic forms" as one of the most stimulating suggestions for his vision of the history of philosophy as a philosophical activity in itself. The 'foundations' of Garin's and Cassirer's respective visions of history of philosophy and philosophy proper were of course different: for Cassirer, philosophical historiography is orientated by philosophy; for Garin, the history of philosophy, as historical knowledge of human culture and life, is a philosophy *per se*. Despite this, in *La filosofia come sapere storico* Garin emphasizes, as we shall see, how inspirational was for him not only the reading of Cassirer's historical works, but Cassirer's "symbolism", i.e. Cassirer's conception of the inexhaustible breadth and fundamental unity of concrete data (mythical, religious, magical, linguistic, artistic, scientific), in which the

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<sup>9</sup> A wide discussion of Garin's relations with Gentile, and with Gramsci's intellectual heritage, is offered by many scholars, in Garin e il Novecento (2009) and Vacca and Ricci (2011).

<sup>10</sup> Garin (1990<sup>2</sup>). About this contribution, the debate it triggered, and its meaning today, see Borghero (2017) and Ferrari (2019).

<sup>11</sup> Ferrari (2011, p. 118).

<sup>12</sup> Garin (1990, p. 115).

<sup>13</sup> Vacca (2011, p. 278).

history of the human being in society, as the true human “nature”, expresses its diverse spiritual products.

One of the main axes around which the relation between Garin and Cassirer rotated was that of the Renaissance and its *Nachwirkung*, marked by the complex genesis and nature of the Cassirer’s idea of the Renaissance. Cassirer’s interpretation of the philosophy of the Renaissance indeed had a fundamental role, as was very clear to Garin, in Cassirer’s attempted foundational reunification of the sciences, and in his philosophy of symbolic forms: the “discovery” of the “unity” of the Renaissance as a ‘symbolic complex’ would not have been conceivable without the demands implied by the philosophy of symbolic forms; and in the constitution of the former, the Renaissance had an essential function.

Cassirer progressed from considering the Renaissance as a kind of prologue to a “modern ideal of knowledge,” culminating in Kant (it was the stage of the *Erkenntnisproblem* and the “critique of reason”), to the recognition of the “theoretical character” of the Renaissance debate on myth, on art and religion. This was the stage characterized by *Individuum und Kosmos*, and by the intellectual exchange between Cassirer and Aby Warburg. As in Cassirer’s case Garin’s interpretation of the Renaissance would also undergo variations, eventually. Garin and Cassirer achieved in fact different assessments of some central issues: the relation between philosophy and humanism, that was indirect for Cassirer, but essential for Garin;<sup>14</sup> Cusa’s influence on the Italian neo-Platonism of the 15th century, and related or ensuing questions.<sup>15</sup> Neither did Garin failed to manifest his disagreement with Cassirer, nor some clarifications or concerns on certain points.

In 1906, in the preface to the first edition of *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, Cassirer had written that “Der Reichtum der philosophischen und wissenschaftlichen Renaissance, der heute noch kaum erschlossen, geschweige bewältigt ist, forderte überall ein längeres Verweilen; wird doch hier der originale und sichere Grund für alles Folgende gelegt.”<sup>16</sup> In his copy of the Italian edition (1952–1958) of *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, Garin underscored these lines.<sup>17</sup> In fact in 1987, introducing the Italian edition of Charles de Bovelles’ *De sapiente*, Garin would cite precisely this passage, remarking how it was “valid” and, for the time, “largely unheard of”, as he spoke of Cassirer’s approach concerning the “richness of the philosophical and scientific Renaissance”; but he adds that those words of 1906 were fundamentally

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<sup>14</sup> In Cassirer’s opinion, humanism was not a philosophy in itself. It helped shape modern philosophy but was not a philosophy.

<sup>15</sup> On this topic, see Ricci (2009, p. 465 n. 24).

<sup>16</sup> Cassirer (1922, Vorrede zur ersten Auflage [1906], p.VIII).

<sup>17</sup> Cassirer (1952–1958, I, 1, p. 12). I consulted the copy belonging to the Biblioteca Garin, in the Library of the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa.

limited to his [Cassirer's] reconsideration of Cusa – of Cusa's theory of knowledge – from which Bovelles had, indeed, then branched out.<sup>18</sup>

Garin and Cassirer would agree in contesting those historians who stressed the continuity between the Medieval Age and the Renaissance. However they would appear less in agreement in contrasting those scholars who denied the original philosophical nature of humanism, or its philosophical contribution to the Renaissance, even though from the beginning of his historiographic work, Cassirer had emphasized the importance of the Renaissance to the constitution of modern philosophy and science. Garin disagreed with Cassirer on the effective contribution of the magical-astrological traditions to the 'origins' of modern science and their lasting impact on modern culture, even though they both pioneered the exploitation of this field in historiography: they dissented on the contribution of magic to the genesis of modern science, and on the length of its cultural influence. For Garin, that role was greater, and more pervasive; for Cassirer it was less, and he was more concerned with the progressive "freeing" or "emerging" of modern thought from magic and astrology, rather than with its lasting through the centuries. Garin rejected the point of view of the historians that insisted on the philosophical "continuity" between the Medieval Age and the Renaissance, and that denied the original philosophical character of Humanism (Duhem, Thorndike, Randall, Kristeller and so on); Cassirer, at least in his American period, was more involved with, and in some ways exploited by, those scholars who maintained both that "continuity" and that "negation"; he stated at some point that Humanism "was not a philosophical movement", and that it transmitted to the Renaissance an "anthropology" rather than a philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Cassirer, on the other hand, had chosen Cusa – a theologian caught between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance – to mark the beginning of the modern history of knowledge. Nevertheless, he contributed meaningfully to fix the "break" between the two periods, using the categories of "style" and "function" to describe the mutation in character and sense that the problems and texts of the Medieval and Classical Ages had undergone in the Renaissance.

It was instead around the idea of continuity between Renaissance, new science, the Enlightenment and modern philosophy, that a major convergence could be found between Cassirer and Garin. Garin did not see such continuity in the ascensional and optimistic way indulged by the Italian neo-Idealists (Bertrando Spaventa and Gentile). Nor did he construe that continuity as a process *de claritate*

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<sup>18</sup> Garin (1987, p. VIII). "Cassirer, comunque, agli inizi del secolo, partiva da un'impostazione tanto valida, quanto, allora, sostanzialmente inedita [...]. Sono parole del 1906, legate fondamentalmente alla sua rivalutazione di Cusano – della teoria del sapere di Cusano – su cui si innestava, appunto, Bovelles."

<sup>19</sup> Cassirer (1945, p. 497).

in *claritatem* culminating in Kantian criticism, that was the kind of ‘continuity’ that he found in Cassirer’s *Das Erkenntnisproblem*. According to Garin, Humanism represented neither an anticipation of Gentile’s actualism nor, on the other side, an historical forerunner of Kepler, Galileo and Descartes, the Cambridge Platonists and Newton, and the *Critique of Pure Reason*, as was instead the case for Cassirer. In *Sessanta anni dopo*, Garin argues that his view of the history of philosophy did not comply with a vision of historiography called to elucidate “una progressiva conquista della verità (*de claritate in claritatem*).”<sup>20</sup>

But along with Cassirer Garin perceived the continuity between Renaissance, modernity and modern science not only as an historiographic issue, but also as a cultural ‘value’. This continuity represented for Garin the acceptance and the perpetuation of a sort of a faith, progressed through the ages, along a rough, non-linear path: a faith in reason and in the human being (an “active” human for Garin, and *symbolicus* for Cassirer; the human being as “function” for the first, and as “existence” for the second, and not as “substance”, in both cases); a faith in the European philosophical and cultural tradition and in human liberty. Together with this faith, they shared the acceptance of the moral duty of transmitting history, of defending its sense and inheritance in the present, not from “religious temptations” or from “crises” of confidence, but from the menace of irrationalism, and from the violence of destiny (i. e., fascism and war). In fact, Garin treated Cassirer as an outstanding representative of the Kantian ‘ethical world’, that he felt as ‘continuous’ with Humanism and with the values of liberalism and democracy, and he saw Cassirer as opposed to the political and ideological features of irrationalism, emerging between the First and the Second World War. In the frame of Garin’s evaluation of the key influence exerted by Kantianism on his own philosophical *Bildung*, and of its role in the shaping of the major philosophical trends between the 19th and 20th centuries, his reference to Cassirer holds also a political and ethical sense. Massimo Ferrari, mentioning Garin’s interpretation of the Davos debate of 1929 between Cassirer and Heidegger, argues that Garin overtly was on the side of Cassirer’s “umanesimo kantiano”, and that he considered Cassirer as the “interprete di un kantismo calato nella storia dell’uomo e aperto, al tempo stesso, a quella dimensione etica che garantiva alla condizione umana un orizzonte teleologico.”<sup>21</sup>

Finally, Garin perceived Cassirer suiting his own reflection on the methodology of historical studies, securing a deep awareness of the “historical”, “concrete” and “multidimensional” character of philosophy and philosophical historiography. Garin felt also that they both rejected the idea that history and the history of

<sup>20</sup> Garin (1990<sup>2</sup>, p. 135). See M. Musté, *La filosofia come sapere storico*, in Vacca, Giuseppe, and Ricci, Saverio (eds), 2011, p. 335.

<sup>21</sup> Ferrari (2011, pp. 116–117).

philosophy could be reduced to the progressive affirmation of “a” single philosophy, necessarily developed in a compact and definitive form.

Garin’s ‘signs of reading’ on Cassirer’s books prove to be consistent with the quotations from Cassirer Garin cites in his writings and with his comments. In the *Introduction* of his copy of the Italian edition (1952–1958) of *Das Erkenntnisproblem* Garin underlined the paragraphs containing the fundamental premises of Cassirer’s work, which would be developed in the philosophy of symbolic forms. For example, Garin underscores the passage where Cassirer observes (I quote from the German edition) that the “Symbole für die Ordnungen und funktionalen Verknüpfungen innerhalb des Wirklichen” should not be considered as “gesonderte und voneinander losgelöste Wesenheiten”, but rather “in ihrer geschichtlichen Abfolge und Abhängigkeit”, and thus the different philosophical systems cannot be perceived as a “straight-line” succession, such that the individual moments “sich friedlich aneinanderreihen, um sich mehr und mehr zu einer einheitlichen Totalansicht zu ergänzen. Nicht in solchem stetigen quantitativen Wachstum, sondern in schärfsten dialektischen Widerspruch treten [...] die mannigfachen Grundanschauungen einander gegenüber”. Moreover, for Cassirer, “In der empirischen Forschung einer Periode, in den Wandlungen ihrer konkreten Welt- und Lebensauffassung müssen wir die Umformung ihrer logischen Grundansicht verfolgen”, which provide us “die letzten Quellen und Antriebe” of the different theories of knowledge, and which are communicated to us only in the form of their “Ergebnis”. Each era creates afresh its concepts of subject and object; each era formulates “das Problem des Wechselverhältnisses von Sein und Denken aufs neue.” (and in the margin here, Garin notes “problems”, in the plural, with the apparent intention that *this* problem wasn’t truly so “unique”); but this process gives rise to a new theory of knowledge, which is the result of the vaster spiritual movement. “Es muss der Versuch gewagt werden aus der intellektuellen Gesamtbewegung eines Zeitalters sein herrschendes und treibendes Erkenntnisideal zu rekonstruieren.”<sup>22</sup>

Thus, in a passage which Garin repeatedly underscores, Cassirer affirms that “Auch die übrigen Gebiete der geistigen Tätigkeit, auch das Recht und die Sprache, auch Kunst und Religion enthalten einen bestimmten Beitrag zum allgemeinen Problem der Erkenntnis”, “ein Beitrag” to the “Erkenntnisbegriff”, which then certainly finds its “Einheit”, its “wahrhafte Erfüllung” and its “Bewährung” “in der exakten Wissenschaft.”<sup>23</sup> The problem of knowledge in the modern era (Garin keeps underscoring these lines), for Cassirer, comes to represent “das Gesamtgebiet” of the

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<sup>22</sup> Cassirer (1922, pp. 3–5, 8–10). Cfr. Cassirer (1952–1958, I, 1, pp. 17–21, 24–27). I consulted the copy of the Italian edition belonging to the Biblioteca Garin, now in the Library of the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa.

<sup>23</sup> Cassirer (1922, p. 11). Cfr. Cassirer (1952–1958, I, 1, pp. 27).

history of philosophy. And the “Kontinuität” and the “Einheit” of this history do not derive from the “Selbstenwicklung der ‘Idee’,” but from a further “Postulat” of reason, which transforms the “Einheit des Prozesses” from “metaphysische” to “methodische”, as a “Bedingung des Anfangs der historischen Erkenntnis.”<sup>24</sup>

Garin subscribed to Cassirer’s understanding of the relation between philosophy and the other forms of spiritual production, just as much as to the need to preserve the ‘systematic’ centre in historical reconstruction. As Garin wrote in *Filosofia and Antifilosofia* of 1956 (his discussion with Enzo Paci, about the methodology of the history of philosophy, reproduced in *La filosofia come sapere storico*), Cassirer’s attempt at transforming the “critique of reason into a critique of culture of which ‘the being cannot be captured if not in the doing’ did not at all coincide with an anti-philosophy”. In fact “This is the function of a philosophy as ‘history’, which would not be fulfilled if one were to discourse in the abstract on the ‘historicity’ of the ‘spirit’ or of nature instead of seeking the formation and transformation of ideas, following as many components as converge therein [...] ‘language science myth art religion as members of a single problematic complex’ (to once again use Cassirer’s expression) in the various interplays of their operation.”<sup>25</sup> In 1959, returning to the theme in *Osservazioni preliminari a una storia della filosofia*, Garin would reprise in Italian translation a passage from Cassirer’s preface of the first edition of *Das Erkenntnisproblem*: “Die immanente Logik der Geschichte gelangt um so klarer zum Bewusstsein, je weniger sie unmittelbar gesucht und mittels eines fertigen Schemas in der Erscheinung hineinverlegt wird. Dass die innere Einheit, die die einzelnen Tatsachen verknüpft, nicht direkt mit diesen selber mitgegeben, sondern immer erst durch gedankliche Synthesen zu erschaffen ist, dies muss freilich von Anfang an erkannt werden.”<sup>26</sup> The ‘facts’ are not determinations of the Idea, nor are they truly enlightened by the

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<sup>24</sup> Cassirer (1922, pp. 13, 17). Cassirer (1952–1958, I, 1, pp. 33, 35).

<sup>25</sup> Garin (1990<sup>2</sup>, pp. 27, 29). “Cercare di trasformare – per continuare ad usare i termini di Cassirer – la critica della ragione in una critica della cultura ‘il cui essere non può essere colto che nel fare, tutto questo era abbastanza esplicito così nei suoi sottintesi come nelle sue indicazioni critiche. Orbene, a parte la sua validità, è proprio questa ‘storia’ come tale, antifilosofia? [...]. Questa è la funzione di una filosofia come ‘storia’, a cui essa verrebbe meno se si mettesse a dissertare in astratto sulla ‘storicità’ dello ‘spirito’ o della ‘natura’, invece di cercare il trasformarsi di nozioni, seguendone quante più componenti vi convergono [...]. ‘lingua scienza mito arte religione come membri di un solo complesso problematico’ (per usare di nuovo un’espressione di Cassirer), nel vario giuoco del loro operare.”

<sup>26</sup> Cassirer (1922, p. VII). Garin (1990<sup>2</sup>, p. 42 n.). The article *Osservazioni preliminari a una storia della filosofia*, previously published in the *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 38, 1959, pp. 1–55, was reprinted in Garin (1990<sup>2</sup>, pp. 33–86), from which I quote. Garin quotes from the Italian edition of *Das Erkenntnisproblem* (Cassirer 1952–1958, p. 11): “La logica immanente della storia giunge tanto più chiaramente alla coscienza quanto meno immediatamente essa viene cercata e proiettata, per mezzo di uno schema fisso, sui fenomeni. In realtà si deve riconoscere fin dall’inizio che

projection onto them of a ‘fixed scheme’; rather they are to be understood in their continuity, in the light of the interpretive operations that we carry out.

Cassirer would subsequently gain further relevance to Garin as a point of reference for an analysis of the method and concepts of philosophy and the history of philosophy, in the context of Garin’s reflections on the method of Warburg and the Warburg Institute, that had represented an important experience to Cassirer.<sup>27</sup> In *Mezzo secolo dopo*, Garin recalled how the reading of *Individuum und Kosmos* had contributed to his discovery of the Warburg Library, and of the scholars who worked there.<sup>28</sup> In the introduction to the Italian edition of Fritz Saxl’s *Lectures (Storia delle immagini*, translated from the 1957 original), Garin retraces the web of relations between Cassirer and Warburg, Saxl and Panofsky, stressing the important role, for Warburg, for Saxl and Cassirer, of the “concreteness” of historic data and investigations, and of their capacity to break free from the general frameworks, meaning the “philosophies in general”. Garin thus sheds light on Cassirer’s reply to a provocative recall to “philosophy”, stemming from the philologist Hermann Usener, to which Cassirer had responded with the 1925 essay on the problem of the “names of the gods”, *Sprache und Mythos*. For Garin, the work of the “non-philosopher” Saxl, and Cassirer’s response to Usener, demonstrated that “concrete” investigations, in which the human “symbolic production” manifests itself in its unity, continually gives rise to crises in “the current interpretive frameworks, the methods of investigation, the relations between disciplines – in a word, to a series of philosophical propositions and hypotheses.” This occurs because, according to Garin, these “concrete” investigations are themselves a way of doing philosophy. They arise from “new general conceptions”, or they postulate them, or express new problems, or overcome the aging of the instruments used up to that moment. At the Warburg Library and Institute, research was conducted “at the margins and beyond the frameworks of current culture,” and “brought into view the first lines of new conceptions [...], establishing the basis for profound modifications of the concept of man, his work, of his very sense,” and thus it was itself, according to Garin, a form of philosophical research.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, returning to the polemic triggered in the 1950s, about a “systematic” philosophical historiography, and the distinction between “philology” and “philosophy”,

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l’unità interna, che lega i singoli fatti, non ci è data immediatamente insieme a questi, ma deve sempre essere creata dalla sintesi del pensiero.”

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. Ferrari (1986) and Ferrari (1996, ch. VIII).

<sup>28</sup> Garin (1998, pp. 156–157).

<sup>29</sup> Garin (1965, pp. XII, XIV). “ai margini e al di fuori degli schemi della cultura corrente”; “facendo affiorare le prime linee di nuove concezioni [...], gettando le basi per modificare profondamente il concetto dell’uomo, della sua opera, del suo stesso senso.”

Garin lamented that “between the two wars, but not only then”, Italian culture had remained insensible to this distinction, because of “tending to be more oriented towards the latest systems, or towards the great conceptual frameworks, than towards the effective elaboration of experience.”<sup>30</sup> This assessment is confirmed in the last pages of Garin’s introduction to Saxl’s *Storia delle immagini*. Here, Garin argues for a philosophical historiography anchored to “things”, which for him is also philosophy, in contrast to a “systematic” history of philosophy that can at least sometimes, perhaps even often, take a distance from “things”. Thus, in the “philosophy” of Saxl and the Warburg Circle, and in Cassirer’s historiography, Garin sees the revival of the “philosophy” of the humanists, which he had portrayed as a concrete perspective on the human being and on all his spiritual productions.<sup>31</sup> In this peculiar sense, as he remarked in his notes for the presentation of Ferrari’s work to the Accademia della ‘Colombaria’ in 1995, he considered Cassirer as “among the most significant and fecund thinkers of this century, and among those with the richest and most challenging legacy.”<sup>32</sup>

A wider appraisal of the relation between Garin and Cassirer is certainly opened up by Garin’s reflection on the already mentioned 1929 Davos debate, which saw Cassirer opposed to Heidegger. His evaluation of that debate implies also the ‘political’ implications which Garin attributed to his own relation with Cassirer’s thought, and to his own general attitude towards Heidegger. In 1973 he reviewed *Débat sur le Kantisme et la Philosophie*, edited by Pierre Aubenque. In particular, Garin welcomed Aubenque’s interpretation: the contrast between Cassirer and Heidegger, apparently centered on two different interpretations of Kant – metaphysical in Heidegger, anti-metaphysical in Cassirer – and on the destiny of philosophy, actually belied the clash “of two worlds”, as “the air was filled with signs of great menace” (i.e., racism, fascism, nationalism). Citing Aubenque’s words, Garin agreed that the opposition between Cassirer and Heidegger was between “a humanist philosophy, which sees itself as the reconciliation of culture and its organisation around the subject which is its center,” and “the radicalism of a criticism that sees nothing other than ‘laziness’ in fulfilling ‘the work of the spirit’ and dares ‘to thrust man into the hardness of his destiny’.” The contrast, as Garin stressed, already foretold “all of the Heideggerian interpretation of Nietzsche’s nihilism, as well as the thematic of the *Letter on Humanism*,” and therefore the discussion on humanism occurring in

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30 Garin (1965, pp. XVI–XVIII). “Di tutto questo, fra le due guerre, ma non solo allora, la cultura italiana è stata, forse, quella che meno di ogni altra si è mostrata consapevole, rivolta piuttosto agli ultimi sistemi, o ai grandi quadri concettuali, che non alla effettiva elaborazione dell’esperienza”.

31 Garin (1965, p. XXVIII).

32 Garin, *Colombaria*, handwritten notes in the Archivio Garin, SNSP, busta 23, n.n. p. 2.

the immediate post-war period, in awareness of the tragedy that had meantime intervened.<sup>33</sup>

In *Sessanta anni dopo* (1989) Garin recalled the non-accidental coincidence of the publication of his book *Der Italienische Humanismus*, and of the *Brief über den Humanismus* by Heidegger (both in 1947, by Francke, Bern), in which Heidegger distinguished his critique of humanism (more precisely of *humanisms*) from nihilism, from the absolution of the “in-human” and the “barbarous brutality”. But, mirroring the “clash between worlds” at the Davos meetings of 1929 (the opposite worlds, represented by Cassirer and Heidegger), was the contrast between Heidegger and Garin himself, who took up Cassirer’s line. Cassirer and Heidegger – in Garin’s words – “were beyond all comparison: different and distant worlds. The ‘humanism’ of which I spoke [in *Der Italienische Humanismus*] placed maximum emphasis on the concept of ‘historical humanism’; strove for the civil engagement of man, in the earthly and political sense of human action [...]. The Heideggerian quips [...] taken literally, were nothing more than banalities, in a discourse that had its roots elsewhere and was aimed at other things.”<sup>34</sup> Also in *Mezzo secolo dopo*, Garin traced back to Cassirer the inspiration and the historiographic context of his decision to proceed from his studies about Enlightenment, to the study of humanism.<sup>35</sup>

However, in *Quale ‘umanesimo’?*, Garin recognised that among the “merits” in the “discussion and refusal” of humanisms on the part of Heidegger, which rejected the “humanisms” as links in the chain of the *Seinsvergessenheit* was that Heidegger recognized the Renaissance humanism as a “metaphysics”, or a “philosophy”, and not just as “*paidea*”, “philology” or “rhetoric”; a philosophy founded on “existence” and on “doing”, and not on “Being”. Nevertheless, Garin defined Heidegger’s call to a new humanism in 1947 as “equivocal”, as a return to a “more antique than the more antique, at which we arrive by retracing history”, as “a return to Being”, related

33 Garin (1973, pp. 204–205). Cassirer and Heidegger (1972, Présentation by P. Aubenque, pp. 15–16). “Sotto il profilo di due interpretazioni di Kant, si confrontano due concezioni della filosofia; si scontrano due mondi [...] e nell’aria c’erano tante cose minacciose [...] da una parte [con Cassirer] una filosofia umanista, che si pensa come il ricongiungimento della cultura e della sua organizzazione intorno al soggetto che ne è il centro, dall’altro [con Heidegger] il radicalismo di una critica che non vede che ‘pigrizia’ nel compimento delle ‘opere dello spirito’ e osa ributtare l’uomo nella durezza del suo destino’ [anticipandosi] già tutta la interpretazione heideggeriana del nichilismo di Nietzsche, nonché la tematica della ‘Lettera sull’umanismo’.”

34 Garin (1990<sup>2</sup>, pp. 145–146). “Erano, a di là di ogni confronto, mondi diversi e lontanissimi. L’umanesimo di cui parlavo io accentuava al massimo il concetto dell’‘umanesimo storico’, batteva sull’impegno civile dell’uomo, nel senso terreno e politico dell’operare umano [...]. Le battute heideggeriane [...] prese per sé, non erano che banalità, in un discorso che era altro e mirava ad altro.”

35 Garin (1998, pp. 156–157, 159).

to “a metahistorical principle”, and so “with all its consequences, ultimately nullifying for man”. Garin’s “return to the past” and to the humanists was instead “historical consciousness, of temporality, of finiteness, of the inescapability of death”, but which brought forth “hope, future, work”, “struggle and conflict”; completely the opposite to the Heideggerian “return to the paternal home, vertigo of depths and nostalgia for origins, or peace of Being.”<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, in the entry *Filosofia* in the *Treccani Enciclopedia del Novecento*, Garin noted that Heidegger has polemized against Cassirer’s “philosophy of symbolic forms”, because Cassirer was aiming “to construct a philosophy of culture without ‘mystic’ concessions of any kind: [...] a rational system of formal structures through which to constitute the sphere of culture, or of the ‘spirit’: or more simply, the world.”<sup>37</sup>

In his review of *Débat sur le Kantisme et la Philosophie*, Garin stressed the contrast between the Nazi-sympathetic speeches pronounced by Heidegger in 1933 and 1934 and the Kantian call to the commitment of the university, in which there must be a “faculty”, which “independently of government orders in matters of doctrine, must have the liberty, not to give orders, but to judge all of them”, exercising the right and reason of “speaking publicly”. Heidegger’s theoretical violence had shaken the foundations of the world “of form, or of the bourgeois, or of culture”, of which Cassirer “was one of the greatest, but also one of the last representatives.”<sup>38</sup>

The Davos meeting, for Garin, “at times assume an almost sinister aspect. Neither are the ideas virginally innocent, nor are the announcements of the ‘metaphysical’ death of man without relation to the extermination camps and nuclear bombs.” The conflict between Heidegger and Cassirer, and thus the interwoven contrast between Heidegger and Garin himself, assumed a dramatic political connotation, including in its focus the historical responsibility of philosophers and philosophies, and of the relations with life, which philosophical “destructions” or “deconstructions” can imply.<sup>39</sup> In the entry *Filosofia* published in the *Quarta Appendice* to the *Enciclopedia*

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<sup>36</sup> Garin (2005, pp. 16, 18–19).

<sup>37</sup> Garin (1977, p. 998). “Così, fra l’altro, Heidegger aveva polemizzato con Cassirer, che, fra il 1923 e il 1929, con la sua ‘filosofia delle forme simboliche’ aveva voluto costruire una filosofia della cultura senza concessioni ‘mistiche’ di sorta: [...]. Un sistema razionale delle strutture formali attraverso cui si costituisce il mondo della cultura o dello ‘spirito’: ossia, semplicemente, il mondo.”

<sup>38</sup> Garin (1973, p. 205). “una facoltà [che] indipendente dagli ordini del governo per quel che concerne la dottrina, abbia la libertà, non di dare degli ordini, ma di giudicarli tutti [e di] parlare pubblicamente”; “[...]il mondo delle forme, o della borghesia, o della cultura [di cui Cassirer] era stato uno dei più grandi, ma anche uno degli ultimi rappresentanti.”

<sup>39</sup> Garin (1973, p. 206). “I colloqui di Davos [...] assumono a volte un aspetto quasi sinistro. Né le idee sono vergini innocenti; né gli annunci della morte ‘metafisica’ dell’uomo sono senza rapporto con i campi di sterminio e le bombe nucleari.”

*Italiana* (1978), Garin noted that the “crisis of reason” became manifest in the aftermath of the Second World War, in which the influence of Cassirer’s thought, not by chance, becomes rare. Through the multitudinous paths by which Heidegger’s influence spread., as in the Frankfurt School, “negation” develops as “self-destruction of bourgeois reason” and in a “destruction of the self.”<sup>40</sup>

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