

Giorgio Agamben
The Open

Not even the lark sees the open.

Martin Heidegger

At stake in the course is the definition of the concept of “open” as one of the names, indeed as the name *kat'exochēn* {preeminent}, of being and of world. More than ten years later, in full world war, Heidegger returns to this concept and traces a summary genealogy of it. That it arose out of the eighth *Duino Elegy* was, in a certain sense, obvious; but in being adopted as the name of being (“the open, in which every being is freed ... is being itself”¹), Rilke’s term undergoes an essential reversal, which Heidegger seeks to emphasize in every way. For in the eighth *Elegy* it is the animal (*die Kreatur*) that sees the open “with all its eyes”, in distinct contrast to man, whose eyes have instead been “turned backward” and placed “like traps” around him. While man always has the world before him – always only stands “facing opposite” (*gegenüber*) and never enters the “pure space” of the outside – the animal instead moves in the open, in a “nowhere without the no”.

This reversal of the hierarchical relationship between man and animal is precisely what Heidegger calls into question. First of all, he writes, if we think of the open as the name of what philosophy has thought of as *alētheia*, that is, as the unconcealedness-concealedness of being, then this is not truly a reversal here, because the open evoked by Rilke and the open that Heidegger’s thought seeks to give back to thought have nothing in common. “For the open meant by Rilke is not the open in the sense of the unconcealed. Rilke knows and suspects nothing of *alētheia*, no more than Nietzsche does.”² At work in both Nietzsche and Rilke is that oblivion of being “which lies at the foundation of the biologism of the nineteenth century and of psychoanalysis” and whose ultimate consequence is “a monstrous anthropomorphization of ... the animal and a corresponding animalization of man”.³ Only man, indeed only the essential gaze of authentic thought, can see the open which names the unconcealedness of beings. The animal, on the contrary, never sees this open.

“Therefore neither can an animal move about in the closed as such, no more than it can comport itself toward the concealed. The animal is excluded from the essential domain of the conflict between unconcealedness and

concealedness. The sign of such an exclusion is that no animal or plant ‘has the word’.”⁴

At this point Heidegger, in an extremely dense page, explicitly evokes the problem of the difference between animal environment and human world which was at the center of the 1929–30 course:

“For the animal is in relation to his circle of food, prey, and other animals of its own kind, and it is so in a way essentially different from the way the stone is related to the earth upon which it lies. In the circle of the living things characterized as plant or animal we find the peculiar stirring of a motility by which the living being is ‘stimulated’, i.e., excited to an emerging into a circle of excitability on the basis of which it includes other things in the circle of its stirring. But no motility or excitability of plants and animals can ever bring the living thing into the free in such a way that what is stimulated could ever let the thing which excites ‘be’ what it is even merely as exciting, not to mention what it is before the excitation and without it. Plant and animal depend on something outside of themselves without ever ‘seeing’ either the outside or the inside, i.e., without ever seeing their being unconcealed in the free of being. It would never be possible for a stone, any more than for an airplane, to elevate itself toward the sun in jubilation and to stir like the lark, and yet not even the lark sees the open.”⁵

The lark (this symbol, in our poetic tradition, of the purest amorous impulse – one thinks, for example, of Bernart de Ventadorn’s *lauzeta*) does not see the open, because even at the moment in which it rushes toward the sun with the greatest abandon, it is blind to it; the lark can never disconceal the sun as a being, nor can it comport itself in any way toward the sun’s concealedness (just like Uexküll’s tick with respect to its disinhibitors.) And precisely because the “essential border between the mystery of the living being (plant or animal) and the mystery of what is historical”⁶ is neither experienced nor thematized in Rilke’s poetry, the poetic word here falls short of a “decision capable of founding history”, and is constantly exposed to the risk of “an unlimited and groundless anthropomorphization of the animal”, which even places the animal above man and in a certain way makes a “super-man”⁷ of it.