

has suspended and rendered inoperative are necessarily separated and transported into a more elevated and solemn sphere. It is possible, in fact, that this separation of the feast into the sacred sphere, which certainly came about at a certain point, was the work of the Church and the clergy. We should, perhaps, try to invert the familiar chronology according to which religious phenomena are placed at the origin, only to be secularized later on, and instead hypothesize that what comes first is the moment in which human activities are simply neutralized and rendered inoperative during the feast. What we call "religion" (a term that, in its current meaning, is missing from ancient culture) intervenes at that moment by capturing the feast in a separate sphere. Lévi-Strauss's hypothesis—which reads the fundamental concepts by which we usually think of religion (*mana, wakan, oronda, taboo*, and the like) as excessive signifiers that are in themselves empty, and precisely for this reason can be laden with any sort of symbolic content—gains, from this perspective, an even wider meaning. Signifiers with "zero symbolic value" may correspond to human actions and objects that the feast emptied out and rendered inoperative and that religion then came to separate and recodify through its ceremonial apparatus.¹⁰

At any rate, whether festive inoperativity precedes religion or results from the profanation of its apparatuses, what is essential here is a dimension of praxis in which simple, quotidian human activities are neither negated nor abolished but suspended and rendered inoperative in order to be exhibited, as such, in a festive manner. Thus, the procession and the dance exhibit and transform the simple gait of a human body walking, the gift reveals an unexpected possibility within the products of economy and labor, and the festive meal renews and transfigures the hunger of an ox. The aim is not to render these activities sacred and untouchable but, on the contrary, to open them to a new—or more ancient—possible use in the spirit of the Sabbath. The blunt and derisive language of the Talmud—which speaks in the same breath of the Sabbath and sexual union (or defecation) as a pledge of the time to come—demonstrates here its utter seriousness.

§ 10 The Last Chapter in the History of the World

In the manonette, or in God.

—Heinrich von Kleist, "The Puppet Theatre"

The ways in which we do not know things are just as important (and perhaps even more important) as the ways in which we know them. There are ways of not knowing—carelessness, inattention, forgetfulness—that lead to clumsiness and ugliness, but there are others—the unconsciousness of Kleist's young man, the enchanting *sprezzatura* of an infant—whose completeness we never tire of admiring. On the one hand, repression is the name psychoanalysis gives to a way of not knowing that often produces inauspicious effects in the life of the one who does not know. But, on the other hand, we call beautiful a woman whose mind seems happily unaware of a secret that her body is perfectly attuned to. There are, then, successful ways of not knowing oneself, and beauty is one of them. It is possible, in fact, that the way in which we are able to be ignorant is precisely what defines the rank of what we are able to know and that the articulation of a zone of nonknowledge is the condition—and at the same time the touchstone—of all our knowledge. If this is true, then a *catalogue raisonné* of the modes and types of ignorance would be just as useful as the systematic classification of the sciences on which we base the transmission of knowledge. And yet, while humans have reflected for centuries on how to preserve, improve, and ensure their knowledge, we lack even the elementary principles of an art of ignorance. Epistemology and the science of method investigate and establish the

conditions, paradigms, and statures of knowledge, but there is no recipe for articulating a zone of nonknowledge. Indeed, articulating a zone of nonknowledge does not mean simply not knowing; it is not only a question of lack or defect. It means, on the contrary, maintaining oneself in the right relationship with ignorance, allowing an absence of knowledge to guide and accompany our gestures, letting a stubborn silence clearly respond for our words. Or, to use an obsolete vocabulary, we could say that what is most intimate and nourishing does not take the form of science and dogma but of grace and testimony. The art of living is, in this sense, the capacity to keep ourselves in harmonious relationship with that which escapes us.

Even knowledge, in the final analysis, maintains a relationship with ignorance. But it does so through repression or, in an even more effective and potent way, presupposition. The unknown is that which knowledge presupposes as the unexplored country to be conquered; the unconscious is the darkness into which consciousness will have to carry its light. In both cases something gets separated in order to then be permeated and attained. The relationship with a zone of nonknowledge, on the other hand, keeps watch over this zone so that it will remain as is. This is done not by exalting its darkness (as in mysticism), not by glorifying the arcane (as in liturgy), and not even by filling it with phantasms (as in psychoanalysis). At issue here is not a secret doctrine or a higher science, nor a knowledge that we do not know. Rather, it is possible that the zone of nonknowledge does not really contain anything special at all, that if one could look inside of it, one would only glimpse—though this is not certain—an old and abandoned sled, only glimpse—though this is not clear—the pertulant hinting of a little girl inviting us to play. Perhaps a zone of nonknowledge does not exist at all; perhaps only its gestures exist. As Kleist understood so well, the relationship with a zone of nonknowledge is a dance.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. *The Tostafar. Nashim*, trans. J. Neusner (New York: Kray, 1979), 201.
2. Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, *Liure des religions et des sectes*, vol. 2, trans. J. Jolivet and G. Monnot (Paris: Peeters/Unesco, 1993), 130–31.
3. Shahrastānī *Liure des religions et des sectes*, 131.
4. Dante Alighieri, *La vita nuova*, trans. B. Reynolds (London: Penguin, 1969), 74.
5. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Werke und Briefe*, vol. 2, ed. F. Beissner and J. Schmidt (Frankfurt: Insel, 1969), 880.

Chapter 2

1. This essay takes up a text prepared for the inaugural lecture of a course in Theoretical Philosophy, 2006–7, the Faculty of Arts and Design, the University IUAV of Venice.
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Abuses of History to Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.
3. Translators’ note: Here and elsewhere Agamben uses *mannequin* in the less familiar sense of “living fashion model,” though the more common sense of “dummy” is quite suggestive.
4. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 66.