

Chapter 11

Aesthetic Experience and the Problem of the Sacred



The mystery is a matter of fact. An optimistic hope for total clarity is a mirage. Total clarity cannot exist. [...]. Therefore, it is appropriate to give the term “mystery” its primordial character, so trivialized by religions and philosophies, that turned it into a mere verbal trick (they know the mystery like the back of their hands, the mystery is for them not mysterious at all). Only the scientific method, and its intransigent character, allows the reconstruction of the original meaning of the mystery.

(Prodi 1983a: 44)

Abstract The human world is the world of language, i.e. of knowledge. To know means to formulate a hypothesis, to then be either verified or falsified. This also means that the “boundaries” of the world are not fixed but shift with the progress of knowledge. But this also entails that it is knowledge itself that produces the unknown. Prodi calls this movable field of experience, shifting along with the process of knowledge, “darkness” [buio]. The problem of “darkness” is the problem of the internal limits of language. Such “darkness”, indeed, is by definition unrecognizable, since it is an inevitable collateral effect of knowledge. There is no science of “darkness”, but this does not mean that it cannot be thinkable via other means. Aesthetic experience and the experience of the sacred are non-scientific ways to “think” the “darkness”.

Keywords “Darkness” · Hypothesis · Limits of knowledge · Aesthetic experience · Experience of the sacred

In Italy, during Prodi’s most philosophically active years, the question of the limits of language was considered a very urgent one. One of Prodi’s principal dialogue partners (although never directly cited in Prodi’s work) was Emilio Garroni, a philosopher who specialized in aesthetics and Kant (and in particular Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*). In his work, Garroni highlighted the transcendental (and therefore, as Prodi would have it, biological) impossibility of achieving an external perspective

on the field of language. Figure 10.1, indeed, contains a problem: who can see language from the outside? Whence, to use Prodi's language, the "darkness"? Garroni asks a similar question:

let us imagine a being who, in order to subsist and to have an experience, needs to be encapsulated — like an insect trapped in amber — in a solid block of transparent material, and that *this and only this* would be its vital and sensorial environment. Well, in these conditions the being that looks is located *within the medium through which it looks, and cannot* be outside of it *without* this act of looking to stop being what it is. Let us say, then, that for such a being looking will essentially be a looking-through, at least in the sense that it cannot be possible for it to try and separate its looking and the distortion caused by the medium. This will be impossible to achieve without turning its act of looking into something completely different from the only kind of looking that is, for it, a looking, and therefore without already becoming something *completely different* and, ultimately, *unthinkable*. (Garroni 1992: 12)

In this way, an inexhaustible tension around the experience of the limit is triggered. This is a limit that cannot be logically transgressed but which cannot not to provoke continuous attempts to transgress it: for both Prodi and Garroni, this is the most proper domain of aesthetics. In particular, aesthetics is the field of experience located at the shifting boundary of language/knowledge: being at the boundary, it is at once inside and outside it. It follows that the two philosophers see aesthetics not as a discipline concerned with beauty and art but rather as the experience of the limit, of the "area of the unknown [...] a very wide and deep domain" (Prodi 1983a: 11)—this is nothing but the other side of the coin of knowledge. Recalling Fig. 9.1, we should see the domain of aesthetics as the converse as that of science and vice versa.

Semiosis—as we saw in Chap. 4—coincides with life and with biology, and, through an internal process of development and increase in complexity, it becomes knowledge and language. For the human animal, language defines the horizon—the *only* horizon—within which knowable objects, the objects of the world, can be inscribed: a "coincidence between knowledge and system of communication" (Prodi 1982: 200) is therefore instituted. But this system is not closed nor immobile: "every system is evolving, and the evolution depends on the extension of the domain of its use (that is, the enlargement of the contacts with the referent, and the greater complexity of inter-individual discourse, grounded on hypothetical activity)" (Prodi 1982: 200). The hypothesis is the proof that the language/world coupling is not stable, since the very need of an hypothesis means that it is not still established the nature of what language is actually speaking. But if it is unstable, it follows that there can always be a new, different way to discover and to think reality, and this is the problem of the limits of knowledge. In Fig. 10.1, both the sayable and the unsayable are represented. The unsayable is such not because something or someone forbids its utterance but because there is (still) nothing that can be said about it.

However, although nothing can be bio-logically said about this indeterminate and indeterminable circumference of the circle of world/language (from Fig. 10.1), this does not mean that it exercises no attraction over us. On the contrary, it is the facet of our experience we truly strive towards, since we hope that we will eventually come to know everything that lies on this side of the boundary: all that we can know through language (the domain of science), i.e. what was always already meant to be

knowable. As is his habit, Prodi does not cite anything, but here the reference to the last proposition of the *Tractatus* is clear, where Wittgenstein writes (a claim that with which Prodi could not but agree) that “6.52 We feel that even if all possible scientific questions be answered, the problems of life have still not been touched at all. Of course, there is then no question left, and just this is the answer” (Wittgenstein 1922: 89). To dwell linguistically in the world necessarily means feeling the world as “limited”. Only the linguistic animal, the animal that formulates hypotheses, can have this feeling. An ant is always at home in its environment, since its natural make-up makes it impossible for it to ask *where* it is and even less *why*. On the contrary, “with language man is equipped with instruments suitable for dealing with unknown entities” (Prodi 1987b: 57). The hypothesis is the natural instrument used to *feel* the limits of language:

[r]eality is not simply the sum total of reading machines and of their correlated “horizons of things”. These are part of an always wider reality constituted by a — presumably — enormous number of things that are and will be irrelevant for any reading machine, and that will not get the attention of any reader. Within reality, the totality of readers constitutes a network. But they are all still part of a reality that overcomes them, being both wider and more homogeneous than they are. The diversity and peculiarity of various readers cannot be equated with a hierarchy or a preferential relation with reality. The only possible relation towards reality is one of inclusion, with no possibility of inverting the terms. No reader can overcome reality, and contemplate it from the outside. It can only be read from the “inside” of a complex system of interactions. (Prodi 1983a: 17)

Answerable questions are those that are asked from within the circle of language and knowledge; they are not core question precisely because they can be formulated and answered—even when such an answer would remain purely theoretical. Radical questions, those that involve our entire being, are those that cannot be asked due to the lack of the necessary linguistic tools: they are located beyond the rules according to which we—and we alone among all animals—can articulate them. For this reason, within that space, “there is then no question left” as Wittgenstein wrote, since it is impossible to formulate bio-logically a question regarding a region located beyond human bio-logic. This means that there is only one thing that can be said regarding the questions that cannot be asked: *that they cannot be asked*— “and just this is the answer”. It is important to specify that “they cannot be asked” does not mean that there is someone who prevents us to pose these questions; according to Wittgenstein the very bio-logical nature of human beings prevents us to pose these question. *Homo sapiens* is such an impossibility. However, according to Prodi this solution is unsatisfactory, since it appears to be the mere acknowledgement of a limit and of an impossibility, and not a positive solution for the unease that prompted the questioning.

Within the circle, we are attracted by what lies beyond its borders, precisely what, by definition, we cannot know, since the logic intrinsic to our life and our language forecloses the knowledge of that which we cannot understand, that lies beyond the borders of language, and that escapes the grasp of our categories. So, Prodi writes that:

the fundamental problem is that of borders: what we cannot understand, that lies beyond the limits, and for which we have no categories. In our epistemology and our ontology is

implicit that the borders of the world are not the same as the limits of our ways of knowing it, and that if silence is an appropriate response regarding that which we cannot say,¹ it is however necessary to acknowledge this silence, i.e. to believe that there can be something that, for us, will forever remain silent. (Prodi 1987b: 212)

As we have seen, this indefinite region of extralogical space can only be inferred from within human bio-logical space:

reading machines, according to their degree of complexity, can read a different spectrum of reality and even — as in the case of man — move very far from the domain they originally belonged to, but always traversing the modes and the links of the internal relations of the real. (Prodi 1983a: 17)

This area beyond language, which is still somehow “felt” without ever leaving the circle of language, can be approached through two distinct yet connected methods: via a hypothetical process of extension of language itself, trying to reduce the unknown to the known, or by wholeheartedly accepting the logically inevitable fact of the limits of language/world. The first of these two methods is the aesthetic perspective—in particular, the one offered by poetry—while the second is that of the sacred.

Let us go back to the circle of language/world, as represented in Fig. 10.1. The human animal, in virtue of its being human, in fact coincides with its language. And language draws the boundaries of its world since—following the biological complementarity between reader and thing read—the world is that which is experience-able/knowable: “an organism knows/interprets (has a specific relationship with) the reality *upon which* it has constructed itself. It interprets the world through its categories; but these categories have been constructed by *the world itself*” (Prodi 1987b: 143–144). And since the set of all knowable things coincides with that of language—“there is no qualitative distinction between everyday and scientific discourses” (Prodi 1987b: 102)—the limits of the world coincide with the (actual) limits established by the rules governing what we can think and say. The point is that, as we have already seen, our human experience is wholly internal to that circle; yet this does not stop us from feeling that beyond these borders, where our categories fail, there is an outside—albeit unknowable —that attracts us, makes us uneasy, and somehow compels us to explore and to know it. This feeling originates, once again, within the circle, precisely because we know that our knowledge—i.e. the sum total of the operations we perform in order to recognize the meaningfulness of some portions of the real (only *some* portions, since the whole of reality is by definition ungraspable by beings that can only inhabit a single point of view, the human *Umwelt*)—acquires a meaning only against the backdrop of the larger and infinitely wide region of the unknown. Prodi observes that this is:

a fundamental element of discourse, and holds the weight of all those things that exist but about which we have no proof. So, the word implies the non-word, not by means of dialectical games but through the mechanism of the genesis of discourse. (Prodi 1983a: 40)

¹The reference is to the last proposition of the *Tractatus*: “7 Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein 1922: 90).

Knowledge is the natural operation through which the meaningfulness of something is established—and this entails the exclusion of a multitude of other things. That which is not meaningful remains in the background, just like every word defines itself against a much wider space of silence, unknown and unthought. But this entails that the unknown is somehow always present, as a background or infinite horizon of (possible) knowledge:

if we think of “rationality” as all those ways in which man learnt how to “humanly” handle a certain portion of reality (thus making it a little more his own), then the rational is only a tiny portion, cut against the background of the irrational and always placed within it. The rational is a minuscule “organized irrational”. (Prodi 1983a: 41)

Aesthetic experience, which Prodi does not consider limited to that of beauty or art, is the kind of experience located in the vicinity of the border. It is akin to knowledge, but it represents its most initial, hypothetical, and tentative moment, precisely because it is originated by a “drive for knowledge”.² An aesthetic experience occurs when, starting with the experience of a precise cognitive placement within the circle of language/knowledge, one tries to move beyond this place and to proceed towards the outside, the unknown, or—as Prodi defines it—towards the “darkness”:

the mystery lies [...] deep inside. If the world is far wider than our conceptual frame and dwarfs us both in terms of its physical dimensions and its history, then our being included within it is the crucial node of existence and of consciousness. There is always an outside, an area of darkness, and it is vain to think that this will ever be exhausted. (Prodi 1974: 169)

As we will see later on, the “darkness” is nothing but another way to allude to that which the sacred refers to with the term “God”, something unknowable and always exceeding our limited descriptive resources:

[t]he hard core of the aesthetic feeling is a certain undecidable placement, our being integrally the object of this undecidability that characterizes the limits (and their beyond). We presumably are already beyond these limits, yet we are also radically opaque to ourselves, unable to perform a thorough introspection or to take shortcuts — while being still in proximity of ourselves, almost coinciding with our own centre, if there is one. (Prodi 1987b: 216)

Aesthetics, as a primordial and permanent form of consciousness and experience of our being limited—logically limited yet (bio)logically driven to exceed the limits—coincides with an area of doubt, of questions without an answer (yet). Put differently, using Wittgenstein’s terms, it is the area of the *awe* felt when facing the world *qua* world: “[a]esthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That there is what there is” (Wittgenstein 1998: 86). This awe always accompanies the feeling of being trapped within language, like Wittgenstein himself observed, in his *Lecture on Ethics*:

[f]or all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language. My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever

²It is apparent that Prodi is referring to the “Wissen Trieb” in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud 2000). According to Prodi and Garroni, aesthetics has more in common with science than it does with art.

tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. (Wittgenstein 1993: 44)

The human animal responds to the unease produced by the experience of the limit with a natural skill designed to face uncertainty: the formulation of hypotheses, the attempt to extrapolate to the unknown and to the future what is already known about the present and the past. One can formulate this point in a different way: the basic bio-logical fact that we mainly approached the world through the mediation of language means that human beings do not live into a *Umwelt*. A *Umwelt* is a *Umwelt* just because it does not pose any question to the animal who lives inside it. On the contrary, the human world presents itself as something which is not at all immediately intelligible; therefore we need do find a meaning to what we perceive into 'our' world. The existence of language is the proof that we do not understand the world we live in. Prodi indeed writes that:

hypothesis and doubt are two aspects of the same mechanism. [...] It is the hypothesis [...] that transforms the knowable world. Doubt refers to areas of the real that are much wider than those we have experience of: it pertains to that domain of "meaningless" things that could become meaningful, an area of possibility. This is not a simple psychological state. It is a *res extensa* that can be linguistically organized. (Prodi 1983a: 38)

In truth, the hypothesis is an internal instrument of language, making our experience of time possible: it decentres the speaker with respect to the moment of his or her utterance, dislocating him or her to another time—the time of hypothesis. Thus, the hypothesis opens the possibility of moving through time, since it breaks the identity between the moment of enunciation and the present time.

A hypothesis is not (and perhaps it never can be) justified, precisely because it is a hypothesis, i.e. an attempt to extend the boundaries of the known into the domain of the unknown. The hypothesis is such precisely because it is unjustified: if it was justified, it would not be a hypothesis, and it would instead be a proposition expressing one of the many accepted and scientifically described facts that lie within the circle of the world/language. So, the hypothesis is a hybrid construct, suspended between the past and the future, between ascertained knowledge and possible future knowledge, and between memory and anticipation: hypotheses are "internal linguistic organizations of memorized data" (Prodi 1983a: 210). In fact, a hypothesis is nothing but the possibility to experience time, because its own "time" is the future; therefore, the "future" shows itself into human "mental" life through the hypotheses. But when the "future" shows itself, the "present" and "past" times also show themselves, because a "future" can only exist in contrast with other times. This is another by-product of the fact that language in fact coincides with the human world: we can formulate hypotheses, thanks to the combinatorial resources of language, allowing us to internally generate propositions not (yet) dependent on the characteristics of the external world. A hypothesis is (relatively) free, since language, as a combinatorial machine, allows the production of an infinite number of utterances, each of which

can represent a possible exploratory strategy, a way to grapple to contents—beyond the space of world/language—that were simply waiting to become (in Prodi’s terms) meaningful, i.e. to select a reading machine able to read them:

[the hypothesis] is an original nucleus of imaginative elaboration [...]. The hypothesis is a fantasy scenario, by which I mean a brain state characterized by the subject’s capacity to freely employ linguistic material he owns, without depending on any selection, restrictions, external/environmental censorships, or feedback onto the real. The hypothesis is a material state of the structure. The internal space extends into the external space, the pole of consciousness: but during the hypothesis’ operative phase the former is temporarily isolated from the latter. (Prodi 1983a: 209)

A hypothesis is intrinsically epistemic but also intrinsically aesthetic (poetic) since it is an internal experimentation, a play of language that appears to function as if moved by a purely combinatorial logic. Yet, it produces what we could define the “cognitive tentacles” that tear fragments of the unknown away from the “darkness”, in order to make them sayable/knowable. By means of a hypothesis, we build a fantastic bridge resting on only one shore—that internal to the world/language—and suspended on the other or perhaps (paradoxically, for this is the intrinsic paradox of hypotheses) resting upon itself. Hence, Prodi writes:

the path of discourse does not terminate with a verifying procedure (a final demonstration), but it is always seeking further verification, i.e. a form of knowledge that would be established through its progress, and through its character of experimental testing, of provisional attempt. (Prodi 1983a: 216)

This paradoxical condition derives from the logical impossibility of speaking about that which lies beyond the borders of the world/language. By definition, nothing meaningful can be said about what is beyond these limits, precisely because no evidence can be brought to bear upon the truth or falsity of our propositions about it. Yet we can still talk about it, and, historically, a lot has indeed been said about it, by means of hypotheses, conjectures, and analogies:

it is certain that *nothing* can be said about the unsayable. [...] However, *if not about the unsayable qua referent/object, we can talk about the unsayable qua sum total of our experiences about it*, real human experiences, since man has always talked about the unsayable. (Prodi 1983a: 42)

Science, coextensive with language—the two being both evolutionary developments of simpler forms of semiosis and therefore of life—defines the boundaries of our world. That is to say, only within science’s—and language’s—sphere of action can we identify known and well-defined objects. However, referencing Wittgenstein, we have also said that science does not exhaust our experience of language nor does it placate our unease towards the domain of the unknown, the “darkness”. Our eyes can only look inwards, so to speak, but at the same time, we feel a very strong “epistemic compulsion” towards that which lies outside, that we cannot see, and yet know that—bio-logically speaking—*cannot but exist*. There is an inside—something which has been already said—only because there is an outside, something (still) unsaid, something extralogical. The only (bio-logical) method we have to access this domain is through the formulation of hypotheses, through the use of analogies, and in general through the aesthetic use of language:

[a]ll we have about these domains is the possibility of speaking (and having spoken) about them: that is to say, the linguistic experiences we have accumulated. [...] When the problem is radicalized, and we tackle the issue of the representation of our worldly placement via an explicitly linguistic perspective, we can see that this allows a dynamic representation: it is experimental, original, communicable, progressive, and it delivers knowledge about ourselves. It is poetry, in the broadest possible sense. *The only alternative to scientific language, in the domains where the latter cannot be applied, is another linguistic structure (or better, another use of the linguistic structure) that experiments not with things, but with segments of language made meaningful through their use.* This is poetry, language employed aesthetically. One could say: “but then it is impossible to say anything about the unknown as a reality, unless this can be penetrated by the scientific method”. That is exactly right. [...] But it is also possible to utter words about the unknown, and about our way of living it. (Prodi 1983a: 43–44)

Let us consider Fig. 10.1 once again. The aesthetic dimension of language, i.e. the hypothetical use of language, is located at the boundaries of our world. Better still, it stands on the boundary, a place where we logically could not stand but where we try to reside by using the instrument of analogy. Analogy is that peculiar linguistic procedure through which what is known is projected onto the unknown in order to try to test its effectiveness and to see if that portion of “darkness” considered by our hypothesis is regulated by the same laws that apply in the domain of the already known. The hypothesis, then, functions analogically:

the analogy operates aesthetically towards the darkness, as an attempt of translation/enlargement of our terrain towards it, in terms of verbal constructs. These cannot be verified; they have no meaning in their objective referentiality. They are grounded on a radical analogical mechanism: [...] to lend our point of view to the darkness, to be seen by unseen eyes. To be seen by things rather than see them, even from their hidden side. (Prodi 1983a: 207–208)

This means that, thanks to the aesthetic use of language, the boundaries of the world/language can be extended: at first, simply hypothetically and then—if the analogy works—also cognitively, as I have tried to represent schematically in Fig. 11.1, where the analogies/hypotheses project towards the unknown (the “darkness”) some kind of “heuristic tentacles”. The domain of the “darkness” coincides with that of aesthetics and the sacred and therefore also with art and religion, art as the material instantiation of the aesthetic function and religion as a reassuring “answer” to the *logical* problem of the “mystery”:

[e]ssentially, it is meaningless to speak of the unsayable *qua* object: but we can still say its unsayability. Just as I have called the religious problem, strictly speaking, the problem of the boundaries (our only way to live an object about which nothing can be said), so I will talk of aesthetics or poetry when referring to what pertains to our (linguistic and epistemic) human experience of the problem itself. Since the beginning, man has projected his experience upon the unsayable, the mysterious, that which is seen as laying beyond the borders: this has then become linguistic material. It was transformed — and continuously transforms itself — into those semantic/syntactic constructs that compose the linguistic reservoir from which we take the materials for our discursive hypotheses. This is a non-trivial part of language. Indeed, it is its most crucial part. [...] The sacred has shaped man no less than hunger. (Prodi 1987b: 216)

The analogical procedure, which characterizes the specifically aesthetic mode of approach to the real, is crystallized in an act of nomination through which a new

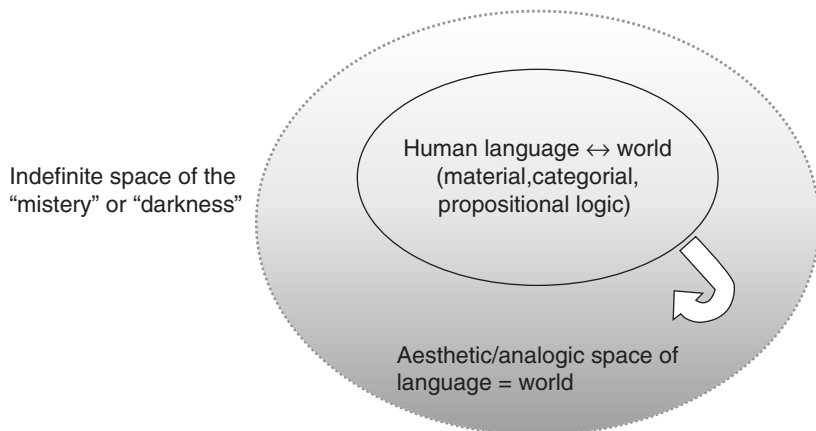


Fig. 11.1 The aesthetic function as hypothesis that ventures into the “darkness”

entity is introduced in the world/language. In this way, an entity is subtracted from the domain of the “darkness” and inserted—albeit in a hypothetical and temporary manner—within the circle of language, of knowledge, and of science. The fundamental link that allows the word to become a kind of ontological *passe-partout* is established between the word and a voluntary action. The nominated object is not necessarily a concrete one, and indeed it likely is—and here we witness the progress of knowledge—an immaterial theoretical entity. However, it becomes the object of our attention the moment that a name tears it away from the darkness and places it in our epistemic spotlight, making it both visible and knowable. The crucial point is that such an entity does not properly exist as a thing *before* being aesthetically (hypothetically) summoned. That is, an object receives a name and receives the status of “object” only through the aesthetic function of language. This does not mean that such an aesthetic function “creates” an object; it means that it becomes something worth paying attention to through the mediation of language. What is at stake here is not the material existence of the object; the point is how to push it, whatever it is, into the human world. It is appropriate to specify that the “darkness” only exists for the human beings, those animals who make experience of their world through language/hypothesis.

The aesthetic function anticipates the existence of a nominated thing, because objectification *follows* nomination, not the other way around. As we have already seen, this does not mean that the name *creates* the object, since we know that every name is nothing but a narrow cut-out extracted from the enormous domain of the unknown. The nominated object or event presumably existed before its nomination, but it was unknown in the darkness (that is, the darkness is nothing but such a biological unknowableness), and therefore its existence was—for science—unknown and at best object of a conjecture. It was there as a potentiality for knowledge, but it was not yet meaningful for us; it was not among the objects of our world. Only through analogy, and the act of nomination that represents the (momentary) conclusion of the analogical process, can such an object or event reach its ontological

fullness and be admitted within the circle of language/world. The name, strictly speaking, does not create the thing, but neither does it merely register its existence by assigning it an utterable label:

[t]he misinterpretation of the name [...] as a reproduction of the thing, and of discourse as a miniature of the real, derives from the consideration of the act of nomination of a reality as superimposed on to the thing, as a pure correspondence. There is an existing thing, and *then* we label it with a name. [...] On the contrary, the name is not reducible to a repetition, a static replacement for the thing, to be inserted in a conventional type of relations. The name is the product of a series of operations that have, as their focal point, the object or the phenomenon. It is their operational equivalent. It “stands for” in a completely different way than a conventional construction that would once and for all establish an equivalence. [...] The name recapitulates an inquiry into reality. With a name we bring to a conclusion a series of operations of verification: it is therefore an experimental system of translation. [...] The name is the equivalent of the operations that had the thing or phenomenon as their primary concern, and that have triggered and “reduced to one” our discriminatory functions with regard to the real. (Prodi 1983a: 186–187)

The “darkness” is for us both a source of unease and of attraction; we feel that in the “darkness”, there are an infinite number of new objects—and therefore new kinds of knowledge, mostly about ourselves—because we are nothing but one of the many shapes taken by life, which is a form of the “darkness” itself. For this reason—the principle of continuity that links together all forms of life and semiosis—to know the darkness means to know ourselves. But before knowing them through scientific methods, we need to somehow present these “dark” entities to our attention (and, for those farther still from the borders of our language/world, scientific exploration is so far ahead in time to be irrelevant to us, and in these cases aesthetic appropriation will suffice). This is the purpose of analogy, of the name in which the aesthetic-analogical movement finds a temporary resting place: to focus our attention on that entity. Or better still—since strictly (cognitively) speaking that entity still does not exist—it serves to unify, or to give a target to, the whole of our activities, blindly addressed to that entity (and prompted more by the *hope* of finding it than by the certainty of its existence). Prodi writes that:

it is the process of convergence towards an object that has the dominant effect on the act of nomination, since it focuses our eyes and our intelligence towards an external centre. This process terminates in a name, which is not the equivalent of the thing, but of the series of operations that, once triggered by the thing, proceed from us in order to individuate it. (Prodi 1983a: 188)

If analogy—poetry and art as a whole—is a form of knowledge, then the problem of its epistemic value arises: are the constructs of poetry somehow true or verifiable, or are they nothing but useless and meaningless wordplay? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to retrace the genesis of analogy. We know it to be, essentially, a hypothesis: this is one of the forms through which language manifests itself. Indeed the hypothesis is intrinsically linguistic (since for an animal who does not think through language, Prodi argues, it is bio-logically impossible to formulate hypotheses). Human language represents the complex evolutionary outcome of a vast number of different forms of semiosis, pervading the entire biological world which—properly speaking—indeed coincides with semiosis. Therefore, the linguis-

tic nature of analogy is—both logically and ontologically—derivative from the intrinsically semiotic nature of the world. And for this reason, analogy, although nothing more than a free linguistic combination and wordplay, can grasp the real and therefore be true—or better, it can function as a hypothesis for the construction of genuinely true theories. Now, according to the reciprocity entailed by the circular model, an analogy can also be seen as starting from the other side of the circle: that is to say, not just from the subject towards the “darkness” but also from the “darkness” towards the subject. In this case, analogy could be considered as the “darkness” trying to become transparent to itself, according to that already-mentioned, and rather unusual (to Cartesian ears), definition of the human offered by Prodi: “nature thinking itself, the interiority of nature” [natura che si pensa, l’interiorità della natura] (Prodi 1987b: 93).³ The analogy is real because it is a manifestation of the real itself: it is a hypothesis of translation linked, via an indefinite series of “translations chains”, to the real itself that, as a whole, coincides with the infinite network composed by these chains:

[t]he existence of this kind of translation has a natural reason, even though, considering the absolute lack of a response coming from the domain of darkness, we only seem to hear a faint echo of our own questions. Whatever the darkness might be, we understand it from within, since it generated us, and we are included in its reality as particular cases. We are simply a small region of darkness that became systematic, linguistic, and — perhaps minimally — self-conscious. There exists an aesthetic relation with the darkness because we have an objective placement within it and a genetic relation with it. (Prodi 1983a: 208)

If aesthetics is akin to science—since in both cases it is necessary to “digest the unknown through the digestive system of a functioning language” (Prodi 1983a: 208–209)—there remains the logical (and therefore unavoidable) fact that neither experience can, as Wittgenstein reminded us, ease our anxiety when faced with the indeterminate expanse of the “darkness”. Indeed knowledge, whether scientific or aesthetic, emerges precisely from the attempt practically to overcome this unease. Yet, due to its partial and always incomplete nature, this knowledge does nothing but increase our dissatisfaction and our feeling of finitude. The endless immensity of the unknown always extends in front of our *logical* eyes, as well as our physical eyes, with which we contemplate the infinity of the starry sky at night and which makes us feel limited, nothing but an infinitesimal part of an infinite “darkness”. This is the “extended [...] region of the unsayable [...] overwhelming us from the outside” (Prodi 1983a: 195), that many—employing a word laden with an anthropomorphism wholly alien to Prodi—refer to as “God”.

For Prodi, this word does not refer to a particular substance nor to a person: if anything, it is the possible matrix of *every* determinate thing, and in particular it represents the overarching, mute horizon of our dissatisfaction as linguistic animals. Linguistic animals who can produce hypotheses because, through language, we can reach the awareness of living inside a closed world, albeit one infinitely extended on the inside: “6.432 *How* the world is, is completely indifferent for what is higher. God

³This formulation seems to suggest that Prodi would not be against the hypothesis of an “anthropic principle” (Barrow and Tipler 1988).

does not reveal himself in the world” (Wittgenstein 1922: 89). For Prodi, that of the the sacred is a bio-logical, and not a cognitive or emotional, problem (that is, theology cannot exist without biology). It is a logical problem because the functioning of our language/hypothesis repeatedly reminds us of the limited nature of the world. In this sense, the “darkness” is a by-product of every linguistic act, even the most banal and unremarkable ones: hence, the “darkness” is not a psychological—private and subjective—issue. Rather it represents the objective correlate of ordinary language (once again, think of a Möbius strip). The “darkness” emerges from an ineliminable *logical feeling*—and this oxymoron effectively encapsulates the originality of Prodi’s stance—that we are located inside a circle. This is the circle of the world/language that cannot be observed from the outside, since this would entail the abandonment of our logic and our language and the adoption of new ones. But naturally (logically), this is impossible, since we are sons and daughters of this language and cannot abandon it at will: which is to say that language (and the human animal, deriving from it) cannot define itself. From this also follows that we are *bio-logically* finite beings, in relation to an infinity that exceeds us, overwhelms us, and towers above us. The problem of the sacred, then, pertains more to bio-logic or bio-semiotics than to the sphere of feelings, since it is through the former that we become conscious, both practically and existentially, of our limits: “the sacred, from this perspective, is therefore a precise drive that is one with logic” (Prodi 1987a: 119). In this sense, the problem of the sacred (unlike the *religious* problem, pertaining to human subjective beliefs belonging to determinate historical religions)—*pace* those utopic materialisms presenting a world without “God”—is inscribed into our very being:

[a]daptation means organized and unitary reading of the environment. This unitary and organized character is always linked to the peculiar and punctual nature of the organism. There never is a [...] *generic* reading, a reading of the *entirety* of reality. Therefore, the organism never emerges out of (i.e. does not correspond to) reality as a whole, it does not stand in front of reality in a biunivocal manner (as large as reality, or as engendering reality, or as capable or interpreting the whole of reality), nor does it present itself as *opposite* to reality. Its position is one of inclusion, dependency, and embeddedness. It is genetically conditioned and adapted (as derivation and knowledge) to a part of reality. (Prodi 1983a: 21–22)

Materialist and functionalist theories of religion try to explain its origin by connecting it to a feeling of dread, the fear of the unknown, and therefore relegating it to our psyche’s most obscure and blind drives. Religion would then be nothing but a sentiment that—at least in principle—could one day be made obsolete by education and sufficiently developed scientific knowledge. On the contrary, following Prodi’s approach to the problem of the sacred, the latter is to be seen as inscribed in our biological make-up, not in the banal sense that our idea of “God” would be somehow innate but rather meaning that our *radically linguistic* nature brings us, through an aesthetic and hypothetical experience, to interrogate ourselves about our limits and to fantasize about that which can or cannot lie beyond them. Once again then, the experience of the sacred is akin to an instinct, an extremely peculiar *logical instinct* (another oxymoron) which is an integral part of our being intrinsically and radically linguistic animals:

[a]s a whole, the hypothesis I propose goes against anthropological and ethnographical theories grounded on the absolutely *irrational* originality and primordially of the sacred, elements that would be proper of an under-developed phase of a civilization. These invariably start by considering a man as already genetically constituted. Here, instead, I want to argue that the origin of the sacred needs to be backdated to the phase of the rational constitution of man, to the creation of his specific differential traits. It is contextual to logic and to morality. The sacred characterizes the passage from the non-man to man, and contributes to the creation of his specificity. (Prodi 1987a: 118)

Of course, Prodi's "God" is not the personal deity of Western theological reflection, and it is a void more than a being, an abyss. Correlatively, rather than outside of us—as it bio-logically is—this "God" is located inside us, generated as a biological consequence of the way in which our world as multilayered linguistic animals is, both epistemically and linguistically, constituted. It is within us in the sense that a religious problem cannot possibly emerge within any other animal than us, since non-human animals lack the cognitive/semiotic resources necessary to project themselves through hypothesis/analogy beyond their immediate present and beyond the limits of their environment. Without this capacity—which presupposes the painful and exalted experience of the limit—it is not possible to grasp one's finitude fully. To put it in another way: the problem of the sacred presents itself to us just because our world is not properly an *Umwelt*. In fact an *Umwelt* is closed, while human world, as a consequence of language/hypotesis, is indefinitely open. A non-human animal cannot experience the bio-semiotic feeling of being trapped into a closed space: although it lives—objectively, i.e. to our eyes—in a world and as part of a given environment, it is not aware of it. The non-human animal is intrinsically a-religious (not atheist, nor a believer), since in its life form, there is no logical-linguistic device that makes the emergence of the problem of the sacred possible. For such an animal, "God" as instantiation of the "darkness" cannot possibly exist: "darkness" only exists as a condition of absence of light, but not as a question, as an interpellation. However, one could say that just because animals do not explicitly believe in "God" they are the only *true* believers. They could be described as so completely absorbed by God that they do not need to believe in "God". Anyway, in the end we return to the circle and the continuity that imperceptibly links together all the points of its circumference: the problem of the sacred is, at bottom, an intrinsically biological one, deriving from life and perceivable only within its world (and this, it should be clear enough by now, is not reductionism, a naïve naturalism, or any stance simply looking to identify the foundation of our behaviours in our animal condition):

[t]hus man learns that, since doors can be opened, other unsayable rooms and corridors extend beyond them. And it is precisely from knowledge, as a propensity to the sacred, that the contextual attitude towards the "mystery" that belongs to it emerges. The darkness as a mute presence, not revealing anything but standing beyond everything and whose precise placement is unknown. We have time and again denied that scientific knowledge could be conceived as a light banishing *all* shadows with its splendour. Rather, it is part of the meaning of the mystery, proper of a species that can reflect upon itself, and that has constructed itself thanks to such a self-reflection. (Prodi 1987a: 120)