Chapter Two

Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci?

2.1. Incompletion and reconstruction

Barely developed ideas [...] questions to himself [...] often unsubstantiated suppositions.¹

Croce’s judgement of the original thematically organised edition of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* (edited by Platone, under the direction of Togliatti, between 1948 and 1951) has only been amplified since the publication of the critical edition edited by Valentino Gerratana in 1975. Appearing to the first glance ‘like a large work site, where the provisional and incomplete nature are at home’,² a closer examination seems to confirm that the *Prison Notebooks* are less a theoretical ‘work’ than an intricate, intriguing (and sometimes, perplexing and frustrating) ‘textual labyrinth’.³ It is a labyrinth with numerous entrances that seem to multiply their number even further upon each incursion, leading the reader onto a seemingly ouroboric path. The steady narrative progression of a theoretical system that ‘knows where it is going’ gives way to an incessant circularity of conceptual intensification of initial forms.

¹ Croce 1947.
² Gerratana 1997, p. xii.
The traveller through this labyrinth is accompanied by a constant sense of déjà vu, a sense just as quickly dispelled as provoked when the entirely new rapidly follows upon the already seen. The *Prison Notebooks* fascinate their readers, tantalising, seducing, drawing them in further on a quest to arrive at a centre that would finally permit them to map the intricate winding alleys of this seemingly endless labyrinth. Yet such a centre is always-already absent. Just as soon as the reader believes to have found a vantage point from which rationally to reconstruct the whole, Gramsci’s thought opens out onto vistas unseen: the multiplying paths of the *Prison Notebooks* are so many *Holzwege* whose second visitation sees them unexpectedly transformed into paths to a sunlit clearing, itself soon replaced by the half-light of a translucent structural canopy.

Prior to the conceptual work proposed by Althusser—namely, to determine Gramsci’s ‘real organic concepts’—the reader’s first task would therefore seem to be a fundamentally literary-critical one: to determine the nature and status of the literary form of the *Prison Notebooks*, in order to establish reading protocols appropriate to them. Fabio Frosini has compared the ‘material nature of this singular work’ to the almost contemporaneous *Passagenwerk* of Benjamin, or, perhaps anachronistically but nevertheless suggestively, the manuscripts of Leonardo da Vinci. Yet another elective affinity might be that with the work of James Joyce, near contemporary of Gramsci, resident for a period in Italy and prisoner in his own way of the nets of ‘nationality, language, religion’. Joyce famously declared that he had put so many riddles in his works that they would keep the professors busy for three centuries. Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, though written in a plain and accessible prose that even today shames the deception-fostering rhetoric of so many major Italian dailies, inspire a similar search for sources, glosses, commentary. The reader would therefore seem called upon not so much to read the *Prison Notebooks* as to decipher them, or, as with Joyce’s *Ulysses*, to ‘translate’ their formal foreignness into a known literary convention. As Buttigieg notes,

> virtually every description and discussion of Gramsci’s texts contains an observation about its fragmentariness and its incomplete character. Such observations are frequently accompanied by the assumption that it is the

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4 Frosini 2003, p. 15.