

BENEATH SAVONAROLA'S NOSE:
Ivan Illich's *prophetic gaze against the shadow of the future*
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“οὐδεὶς προφήτης δεκτός ἐστιν ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ”¹

Pistoia, Sala Maggiore, Palazzo Comunale, May 24, 1997, Saturday evening: an old man, who looks back on his destiny “as a wandering Jew *and* Christian pilgrim”,² gives a speech on Gerolamo Savonarola, the great heretic saint of the Italian Renaissance, in front of a group of learned scholars and a few fellow friends. His Italian is rusty, but still colourful and poignant, fitting someone who once knew the language very well but is now out of practice; his long limbs energetically follow his big hands which give shape to invisible patterns of thought. On his right cheek a bulging tuberosity is obvious: according to him, not a sign of oncogenic illness, but rather an *Ungemach*, an old German name for something which is “out of joint”.³ His name is Ivan Illich. How did it come to be

1 Greek New Testament, Lc. 4: 24 (Cfr. Saint James Bible: “No prophet is accepted in his own country”). For the careful reader this epigraph should be read in correlation with Hugh of Saint Victors’ famous quote: “... he is perfect to whom the entire world is a foreign land [*perfectus vero cui mundus totus exilium est*]” (in: *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor. A Medieval Guide of the Arts*, ed. by Jerome Taylor, Columbia University Press, 1961, p. 101). This idea of “being in the world without being of the world”, so strongly relevant for the Christian tradition, was first codified in the *Epistle to Diognetus*: “They live in fatherlands of their own, but as aliens. They share all things as citizens and suffer all things as strangers. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and every fatherland a foreign land” (*The Epistle to Diognetus. The Greek Text with Introduction, Translation and Notes* by Henry G. Meecham, Manchester University Press, 1949, p. 81). Cfr. footnote 52 in this essay.

2 Ivan Illich/ David Cayley: *The Rivers North of Future. The Testament of Ivan Illich* ed. by David Cayley, Anansi, 2005, p. 147. Highlighted by me.

3 Cfr. *Grimms Deutsches Wörterbuch*: UNGEMACH, in: Bd. 11, III Abeilung, Leibzig,

that this man, who “become interested in Savonarola when [he] was a boy of thirteen or fourteen living in Florence with the enthusiasm one can have at that age for rebels”,⁴ opened this almost forgotten window to his past?

The *secular* occasion was a rather academic one: his old friend, the historian Paolo Prodi (1932-2016), had invited him to give the closing speech of a series of meetings, organized around the upcoming fifth centenary of Savonarola’s death, burned at the stake in Florence, May 23, 1498. However, what this occasion brought up was something of a rather more *spiritual* nature. Emblematic of this deeper sensibility was the fact that when all the speeches of this occasional community of scholars were collected and published under the quite pompous title: *Savonarola. Democrazia, tirannide, profezia* [Savonarola. Democracy, Tyranny, Prophecy],⁵ Illich’s speech was not printed, and his name was simply mentioned as *pro forma*: “sezione quarta conclusiva: presiede e conclude Jvan Illich”.⁶

Of course, Illich, together with his friend and theologian Lee Hoinacki who was present at his speech in Pistoia,⁷ had tried to set down a more structured form of it, but for one reason or another, they failed.⁸ However, this failure must not only be explained by Illich’s infirmity or lack of time. It was clear in the way the speech was set that a more antithetic

Verlag von S. Hirzel, 1936 pp. 758-766; the direct quotation is taken from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Act 1, sc. 5.

4 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 153.

5 *Savonarola. Democrazia, tirannide, profezia* a.c.d. Gian Carlo Garfagnini, SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze, 1998.

6 Garfagnini, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. xv.

7 He was cited directly by Illich during his speech, under the Latin version of his name: Ceslaus/ Lee.

8 I thank Fabio Milana for this information, during our email exchange about this subject, January 2025.

form—compared to all the other academic speeches delivered during this meeting—could not be conceived. Illich talked to his audience, his speech was very personal, full of anecdotes, and *incarnated* the topic he was lecturing about.

And *Ivan*, as Illich's name was curiously written in the mentioned miscellanea, knew it: he knew that whenever he held a public speech, he was speaking with an *alien*, but never alienated, voice. In his later life, he always perceived himself “as a xenocryst”,⁹ a metaphor for a stony structure, which is washed away over the millennia and filled up with new magmatic material with only its original crystal-form left,¹⁰ or as a “bird-of-paradise”, the kind of birds that do not sing nor chirp but croak.¹¹ Illich's thoughts were, indeed, croaked and not chirped precisely because they were not tuned to any common ideological mainstream. So, he was perfectly coherent with himself, when he announced, “this foolishness, this foolish idea to conclude a meeting of great philologists, historians of philosophy etc, with an *intermezzo*, a thematic reflection, a bit like a clown who ends a great theatrical performance”¹² Here Illich picks up consciously the classic frame of the Christian

9 Ivan Illich: *Philosophy... Artefacts... Friendship* (March 23, 1996); here I refer to the text of the Italian translation of this speech, contained in the book: *In cammino sullo spartiacque. Scritti su Ivan Illich*, a.c.d. Adalberto Arrigoni, Emanuele Morandi, Riccardo Prandini, Milano, Mimesis, 2017, p. 73.

10 Oswald Spengler is, according to my knowledge, the first one to use this metaphor to circumscribe his notion of “pseudo-morphosis [Pseudomorphose]”, in: *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgesichte*, München, C. H. Beck Verlag, Vol. 2, 1922, p. 227.

11 Ivan Illich, *Philosophische Ursprünge der grenzenlosen Zivilisation*, in: *Grenzen-los? Jedes System braucht Grenzen – aber wie durchlässig müssen diese sein?*, hrsg. von Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, Springer, 2014, pp. 202-211.

12 From now on, all the direct citations from Illich's speech are going to be set in my translation of the original Italian version. Since there is no original text, I transcribed the speech, which is still available online as radio recording: <https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/94189/savonarola-democrazia-tirannide-profezia-convegno-su-girolamo-savonarola?i=2073054>.

fool,¹³ *stultus in Deo*, and shrouded by this *dramatis persona*, he tried to display Savonarola's life in his last days as "a model attitude towards the Church, as well as the character of a man who knew in an extraordinarily beautiful way how to die".¹⁴ But first things first.

Thanks to Illich's personal notes,¹⁵ it is possible to reconstruct part of the intellectual journey which brought him to Pistoia. On April 22, 1997, Illich notes: "The pamphlet describing the Meeting in Pistoia just arrived".¹⁶ The meeting in Italy took place on the 23 and 24 of May of the same year. In June, Illich already flew to Ocotepec, Mexico, where for two weeks he started his famous interview with David Cayley, which later became the raw material for the book *The Rivers*

13 The Clown as *Stultus in Deo*: cfr. "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise" (Saint James Bible, Cor. I, 1: 22). Already in *Tools of Conviviality* Illich points out how Clowns, Poets and Prophets deeply rely on each other: "Poets and Clowns have always risen up against the oppression of creative thought by dogma. They expose literal-mindedness with metaphor. They demonstrate the follies of seriousness in a framework of humor. Their intimate wonder dissolves certainties, banishes fears, and undoes paralysis. The prophet can denounce creeds and expose superstitions and mobilize persons to use their lights and wits. Poetry, intuition, and theory can offer intimations of the advance of dogma against wit that may lead to a revolution in awareness" (*Tools of Conviviality*, Heyday Books, Berkely, 1973, pp. 60-61). This thin red line of the "*stultus in deo* topic" reappears in his open letter to Helmut Becker, 19. November 1992, *The Loss of World and Flesh*: "The Russian and Greek world also offered the possibility to become not a monk but a holy fool, and for the rest of life cadge with dogs and beggars in the atrium of a Church" (here I quote the English translation made by Muska Nagel and Barbara Duden). The Latin term *stultitia* expresses what Illich calls *foolishness* (cfr. in: *The Rivers North of the Future. The Testament of Ivan Illich*, Anansi, 2005, pp. 57-58, p. 170). This foolishness is deeply embedded in European history from the holy fools of Byzantium to the works of Saint Francis of Assisi, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Ludovico Ariosto, Torquato Tasso, Michel de Montaigne, William Shakespeare, Giordano Bruno, Miguel de Cervantes, up to Dostoevsky's *Idiot*, only to name few of them. Here, *ex imo cordis*, I thank Alice Musso for having me shown how Prince Myškin, Dostoevsky's great character, owns a rightful place in this genealogy.

14 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 153.

15 Ivan Illich, *In the Mirror of the Past III* (unpublished); the numeration follows the one present in the documents displayed online by the Archive of the Stiftung CONVIVIAL: <https://www.convivial.de/illich-archiv>.

16 Illich, *Mirror III*, p. 147.

North of Future.¹⁷ his impression of his Savonarola-journey in Pistoia left a vivid testimony in the twelfth chapter of that book.¹⁸ Interestingly, already in his notes, Illich points out that he intended to use his gathered material about Savonarola to start up a larger editorial enterprise, including his interview with Cayley:

In my speech on Savonarola, I just might succeed to avoid the use of the etymon “prophecy”; I doubt that I will succeed. What I want to do in preparation for Cayley: clarify in my own mind HOW i.e. *novo modo* I must speak when I correct the Chicago speeches on *nova* such as pain, hospitality, powers, for publication. Therefore, I am not worried of losing time by throwing a quick glance around the panorama which shows the sceneries within which “prophecy” was used.¹⁹

Within this tiny chorological window, from mid-April to the end of June, Illich presumably tried to develop a concentrated view of his own ideas. And what began as an inquiry into the conceptual historicity of prophecy ended as the testimony of friendship. In other words, Illich’s intention was to mirror himself in Savonarola’s shadow, which he evokes like a good necromancer²⁰ from the Realm of the Dead, but not to become like him: he wanted to feel the distance between someone who could still bear the name of the prophet and himself who acknowledged that “the time of prophecy lies behind us. The only chance now lies in our taking this vocation as that of the friend”.²¹ Illich understood that exercising the rule of

17 Cfr. Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. xvi.

18 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, pp. 153-156.

19 Illich, *Mirror III*, p. 148.

20 Cfr. *In Conversation with Ivan Illich*, Anansi, 1992, pp. 238-239.

21 Illich, /Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 170.

a prophet was not only culturally but also historically illegitimate, but from the impossibility to be a prophet comes the possibility to call upon a new vocation of prophecy: the *vocation of friendship*. He claimed that the renunciation of the rule of the prophet in history does not preclude us from the vocation of prophecy, so long as this prophecy is taken up as the vocation of friendship. This is what Illich tried to tease out during this period, and he worked so intensely on himself that for the rest of his life he never turned back to Savonarola and the idea of prophecy. For himself, he was done with Savonarola not because he would overlook him, but because he was saturated by him.

In April 1997 Illich made a summary in his notes of his current research, organizing it in four clusters of so called “heavyweight-words”:

I am sorely tempted to put “prophecy” into a tight epistemic bracket. Three times already I have picked up the scent of “HeavyweightWords” with an almost 360degree angle of meaning. The first I dealt with in “Verwirrung”. The second grew into “Plastikwörter”. The third is growing from “Vineyard” into “Textus”. With “prophecy”, I am on the trail of a fourth TYPE²².

These clusters showed Illich’s intellectual journey until this point. With the German term *Verwirrung*, translatable by “confusion”, “bewilderment”, even “disorientation”, he tried to catch the historic and cultural roots of Man’s *alienation* within Modernity. Under this term, it is possible to understand most of Illich so called “second phase”, as Barbara Duden pointed out: “The second half of his working life has thus been rendered a blank page, a map without features, on which two islands unexpectedly break up an expanse of empty space, his

22 Illich, *Mirror III*, p. 147.

books *Gender* (1981) and *In the Vineyard of the Text* (1991)".²³ Since "the loss of vernacular gender is the decisive condition for the rise of capitalism and a life-style that depends on industrially produced commodities"²⁴ *Gender* is the book which traces this *Verwirrung* back to its founding moment when "the regime of scarcity" opposes "the reign of gender". The second cluster of heavyweight-words is related to the notion of *plastic words*, introduced to Illich by the German linguist Uwe Pörksen.²⁵ The third cluster refers to the historic moment, when the book, within the history of literacy, was transformed from a *vineyard* of words into a logical-structured *text*. This topic was extensively elaborated when Illich turned to his "friend",²⁶ Hugh of Saint Victor²⁷. Finally, the fourth and last cluster-type deals with a quite unusual topic: *prophecy*. And it is at the crossroads of prophecy where Illich meets Savonarola.

Savonarola was a Dominican monk who was born in Ferrara in 1452 and burned at the stake in 1498 as a heretic by order of pope Alexander VI, *Borgia*. 1492 was a blood-thirsty year in Western civilisation. In January, the Islamic dwarf-kingdom of Granada was finally conquered by the Spaniards. In July, the Jews were pushed out of the newly unified Kingdom of Spain. In August, Christophorus Columbus started his colonial enterprise and Lorenzo il Mag-

23 Barbara Duden: *Ivan Illich - Jenseits von Medical Nemesis* (1976) - auf der Suche nach den Weisen, in denen die Moderne das „Ich“ und das „Du“ entkörpert. Symposium für Ivan Illich zum Abschied Universität Bremen, 7-8. Februar. 2003, von Barbara Duden; engl. Version: *Ivan Illich. Beyond Medical Nemesis* (1976): *The Search for Modernity's Disembodiment of "I" and "You"* (Notes for a contribution at the Bremen Symposium "Ivan Illich zum Abschied", February 7-8, 2003, translated by Jan Lambertz), p. 2.

24 Ivan Illich, *Gender*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1981, p. 3.

25 Uwe Pörksen, *Plastic Words. The Tyranny of Modular Language*, translated by Jutta Mason and David Cayley, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995. Original German Title: *Plastikwörter. Die Sprache einer internatinalen Diktatur*, Klett-Cotta Verlag, 1988.

26 Illich / Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 219.

27 Cfr. Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*, University Chicago Press, 1991.

nifico, the head of the Medici clan died and, according to legend, Savonarola was sitting at his deathbed condemning him for his sinful life.

Florence, the capital of the Italian Renaissance, now fell under the spell of Savonarola: pagan books and lascivious pieces of art were burned, a rigorous and severe lifestyle was preached and violently applied in the narrow streets of this grand city. But Savonarola went even beyond that by attacking the pope himself, Borgia, who entered history as a pure manifestation of power and lust. In 1494, the mills of history were active again when Charles VII, king of France, invaded the Italian peninsula to reclaim the kingdom of Naples for his family. Under the force of his mighty army, the brittle equilibrium between the culturally flourishing but politically weak Italian princedoms was destroyed. Before Charles' military enterprise, Savonarola preached in Santa Maria del Fiore that a biblical-like Flood was coming again to purge the world of evil. After effective diplomacy prevented the French army from sacking Florence, Savonarola was widely hailed as a prophet. This was the beginning of his power and at the same time the reason for his fall.

Of course, reality was much more complex, and Savonarola was much more than a religious tyrant, since his *vita* was deeply woven in the cultural tissue of his age: deeply loved by Pico della Mirandola, Savonarola was, at the same time, hated by Marsilio Ficino, and Niccolo Machiavelli never made too clear if he was condemning the monk or secretly admiring him. Until today, Italian historiography is split into those who believe that Savonarola was a charlatan²⁸ and those who think that he was a saint-like charismatic figure.²⁹ Prodi,

28 Cfr. Franco Cordero: *Savonarola*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1986-1988, in 4 volumes.

29 Cfr. Roberto Ridolfi: *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola* (1952). An English translation of this text is available as *The Life of Giovanni Savonarola* by R. Ridolfi, translated by Cecil Greyson, New York, Alfred Knopf, 1959.

as an internationally recognized historian, made his own view of Savonarola quite clear when he said:

The central monument, much more than his sermons and his writings, on which someone should reflect is still *la Sala dei Cinquecento* [the Hall of the Five Hundred], which was built under the commission of Savonarola at Palazzo Vecchio for the Gran Consiglio [Great Counsel], established by him as a pivot of the new democratic regime, which replaced the oligarchy of the Medici.³⁰

Illich had no intention to judge Savonarola's historic figure, as he made clear that he only touched "these slopes, the pre-Alps of the huge mountain of books which go under Savonarola's name". Illich was not talking as an historian at this occasion, even if he prepared for it as such. He was not interested in analysing Savonarola's historical significance but wanted to evoke the distance between him and Savonarola, wanted to feel the historic abyss between him and the Dominican monk because he wanted "to know *how* in a world of risk, probability, and virtuality, it's possible to talk [not only] about Savonarola, but also about Kant". Savonarola died in 1498 and Kant in 1804:³¹ over the three centuries separating these two men, the historic and mental conditions were emplaced which, in our contemporary era, transformed actual danger into risk-thinking, prophecy into probability and the old notion of *virtù* (or *virtus*) into virtuality. Illich wanted to understand these turning points.

30 Cfr. Paolo Prodi, *Profezia vs. Utopia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013, p. 23. My own translation.

31 Illich mentions Kant because in a prior lecture, Mario Miegge (1932-2014), protestant theologian from Aosta and professor at the university of Urbino and Ferrara, contributed a piece on the interconnection between prophecy and policy during the age of Hugo Grotius and Immanuel Kant: *Profezia e politica tra Grozio e Kant*, in: *Savonarola. Democrazia, tirannide, profezia*, a cura di Gian Carlo Garfagnani, SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo, Firenze, 1998, pp. 231-242.

This is typical for Illich, who in his later decades tried to conceive history through a double-loop: in one direction, history was conceived as *Verlustsgeschichte*; observed from the point of view of what was lost and not of what was gained;³² in the other direction, through an historical analysis, Illich tried to honor those things which got lost within the totalitarian logic of progress. This particular form of historic thinking (*Geschichtsdenken*) allowed him to think *with* history rather than *on* history. For this reason, prophecy became such an important topic for him that he was “tempted to put “prophecy” into a tight epistemic bracket”³³ Together with Paolo Prodi,³⁴ Illich thought that Savonarola was “the last one who could pretend to be a prophet”. What Illich tried to point out was the fact the prophecy was not primarily seen as the capacity to foresee the future but rather as the capacity to read the present. This was still perceived in a certain Catholic milieu as David Maria Turoldo (1916-1992) poignantly expressed: “Il Profeta non è tanto quello che annuncia il futuro, ma quello che denuncia il presente”³⁵ (the prophet is not so much someone who announces the future as someone who denounces the present). This was already clear for pope Gregory the Great in the VI century, when he underlined that “the spirit of prophecy doesn’t foresee what will be, but clarifies what already is”, it “doesn’t foresee future things but it reveals whatever is hidden”, it “clarifies to the prophesizing soul whatever cannot be experienced directly by the body”.³⁶

32 Cfr. Jean Robert: *Letà dei sistemi. Nel pensiero dell'ultimo Illich*, Hermatena, 2019, p. 86.

33 Illich, *Mirror III*, p. 147.

34 Cfr. Paolo Prodi, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 22: “Savonarola, che io continuo a ritenere l'ultimo dei profeti”.

35 Cit. in: Prodi, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 112.

36 Gregorius Magnus, in: *Patrologia Latina Cursus Completus*, Migne, Paris, Vol. 76, p. 787 A-B: “prophetiae spiritus non praedicit quod futurum est, sed ostendit quod est [...]”; prophetia ... non predictit ventura sed ... prodit occulta [...]; ibi fit presens prophete-

For Illich, our actual modernity was utterly overshadowed by what he called “the tyranny of our days, which is [the tyranny] of need”. But this tyranny was the direct result of a worldview, which abandoned the prophetic capacity to read the present for the idealistic will to redesign the whole world within the time-framework of future-oriented project-thinking, also known as *Utopia*. He believed that the concept of “needs” and the one of “utopia” were strongly connected.

To understand this, we must follow the interpretation of Paolo Prodi. According to him, after Savonarola, the historic energies of prophecy were encapsulated and transferred to two novel ideas, which had never before existed in the Western tradition, from Antiquity through the Middle Ages: *Utopia* and *Revolution*. Both were the result of the secularisation process, which tore apart—temporally and spatially—the original unity of the prophetic dimension. The utopic ideal allowed the *novum* to be conceived in the virtuality of a mental non-place, while the revolutionary ideal conceived the *novum* in the virtual time of the future. If we look more closely, we can see how Prodi places this utopian-revolutionary turn between 1516, the year in which Thomas Morus published his book *Utopia* (which gave the name to the whole utopian current), and 1789, the year of the French Revolution. This period, from 1516 to 1789 covers, roughly speaking, the period mentioned by Illich between Savonarola and Kant.

In Pistoia, Illich clearly and fearlessly pointed out that friendship “is the only balance which I can oppose to utopia”, a concept, which since the 1980s he always tried to avoid.³⁷

tantis animus, ubi per presentiam non est corpus”.

37 Illich, already in a speech in 1980 he stated: “... con tutta la disciplina a mia disposizione, insufficiente, – mi critico io stesso per il [mio] passato – cerco di parlare di quello che *non* è possibile; cerco di evitare, sempre, l’utopia, la descrizione di quello che *dovrebbe* essere [...] la buona legge che tratta dell’habitat dovrebbe, anzitutto, essere una legge proscrittiva e non una legge prescrittiva, una legge che dice quello che non puoi fare, che nessuno può, nemmeno il governo può fare, e non una legge

For him, the concept of Utopia, this virtual space in which the human mind could create a world for itself as much as the Creator did,³⁸ was the prototype of “a new dimensionless cybernetic space”³⁹ In Illich’s view, friendship was not only the proportionate antidote to the virtual non-place of a worldless and wordless cyber-society, but it also corresponded to a new way of how the vocation of prophecy could be re woven into the tissue of human relations. For Illich, the idea that someone could build a perfect building or an entire society as a pure mental project with “all material stuff being excluded”,⁴⁰ was the historical precursor for an “intensive self-algorithmization, not only disembodiment, but reducing myself entirely to misplaced concreteness by projecting myself on a curve”.⁴¹ And any thinking in utopia was for him a sign of “misplaced concreteness”.

This is what Prodi summarized in his later reflections on the concept of Utopia, thinking *after* Illich:

in the last centuries we moved from a Christendom, based on the *Incarnation* [...] to a Christendom, to a civ-

che dice quello che per ognuno si deve fare” (Convegno “Autocostruzione e tecnologie conviviali”, Rimini, 1 marzo 1980). And in *Gender* Illich points out: “And I reject the label of scientific historian, for I will not reconstruct the past with key words, nor with concepts mined in utopia, yet I believe in honoring the dead by research that is public, disciplined, documented, and critical” (Ivan Illich, *Gender*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1982, p. 177).

38 Cfr. Ivan Illich, *Texte und Fragmente. Vorlesungen in der Penn State*, 1996, [unpublished] pp. 64, where he quotes Joseph Rykwert: “... man constantly builds his universe by words, as God had once made the cosmos by the Word,” in: *The Dancing Column. On Order in Architecture*, London, The MIT Press, 1996, p. 84. Rykwert was in this particular passage talking about Nicholaus of Cusa, the great speculative Mystic and pre-modern philosopher of the XIV century.

39 Illich, *op. cit.*, 1992, p. 123.

40 This is how John Dee (1527-1608) translated in his *Mathematical Praeface* (1570) Leon Battista Alberti’s (1404-1472) famous quote: “formas praescribere animo et mente *omni materia secluse*”, in: *L’Architettura* [De re aedificatoria], Il Polifilo, Milano, 1966, p. 21.

41 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 210.

ilization, where the flesh is vaporized into the word, in the revelations of seers or into the digital image [...] the new [social] projects are facing the problem of the evaporation of the body into an artificial or virtual reality, in which the central problem of the choice between good and evil is radically questioned, both in the prophetic and in the utopic horizon.⁴²

Illich, already in 1995, pointed out that friendship is somehow related to our “apocalyptic world”:⁴³

An eschatological *philia* is newly, uniquely, urgently required by an apocalyptic environment [Umwelt]. In our common tongue translated: the mutual gift of the *pupilla* is as never before needed and made possible under the circumstance of a disembodied, depersonalized environment [Umwelt].⁴⁴

For Illich “the mutual gift of the *pupilla*” was the supreme occasion in which the human being could become an incarnated “I” thanks to the grace of the “Thou”: only when we are able to mirror ourselves in the eyes of our vis-à-vis, we can recognize our enfleshed self.⁴⁵

42 Paolo Prodi, *Profezia vs. Utopia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013, pp. 30-31: “... negli ultimi secoli si è virato da un cristianesimo basato sull’incarnazione [...] a un cristianesimo, a una civiltà in cui è la carne che evapora nella parola, nelle rivelazioni dei veggenti o nell’immagine digitale. [...] le nuove proiezioni pongono il problema di una evaporazione del corpo in una realtà artificiale o immaginaria in cui il tema centrale, sia nella profezia sia nell’utopia, della scelta tra il bene e il male viene posto radicalmente in discussione”. My translation.

43 Illich /Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 169, p. 177.

44 Ivan Illich, *Texte und Fragmente. Bremer Vorlesungen im Wintersemester, 1995* [unpublished], p. 5: “... eschatologische *philia* wird neuartig, einzigartig und dringend durch apokalyptische Umwelt gefordert. Auf deutsch: das gegenseitige Geschenk der *pupilla* wird wie nie dringend und möglich unter Bedingungen einer entleibten, entpersönlichten Umwelt”.

45 The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber was the first one who elaborated this I-Thou relationship in his book: *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, 1937.

Friendship as prophecy, in its Illichian sense, presupposes this “fleshiness”⁴⁶ and it can be seen as exactly the opposite notion of the disembodying virtuality of our rising cyberculture, where the virtual non-body is seen as *optimum* and not as *corruptio*. Or as Jean A. Polly, the American librarian who coined the expression “surfing the internet”, proudly underlined in 1992 when describing the new attitude of digital communication which was still in its infancy:

The old barriers of sexism, ageism, and racism are not present, since you can't see the person to whom you're “speaking”. You get to know the person without preconceived notions about what you THINK he is going to say, based on visual prejudices you may have, no matter how innocent.⁴⁷

Not to see, not to feel, not to sense the person to whom you are speaking is therefore the anti-model of what Illich understood as *conditio humana*. And after reading these lines, Illich appears to be even more *alien*, if not equally distant to this “diseviling”,⁴⁸ to that peculiar dimension of the our time in which, as Paolo Prodi previously mentioned, “the choice between good and evil is radically questioned”,⁴⁹ since good and

“Through the *Thou* a man becomes / [Der Mensch wird am Du zum Ich]”. If not directly, this concept was brought near to Illich indirectly by the francophone philosopher Emanuel Lévinas and his idea of the *visage* as an enfleshed ethic (cfr. *Totality and Infinity*, ed. 1961). Illich, in his 1995 written preface to the German reedition of *Gender (Genus. Zu einer historischen Kritik der Gleichheit)*, Beck'sche Reihe, 1995), underlines the importance of his current research on Lévinas and the historicity of the gaze, done in Bremen (“Hier haben wir uns bei der Lektüre von Emmanuel Levinas an die Geschichte des Erblickens der Pupilla im Antlitz des Anderen gemacht”, p. 10).

46 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 206.

47 Jean Armour Polly, “Surfing the Internet”: *An Introduction*, in: Wilson Library Bulletin, June 1992, pp. 38-42.

48 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 178. The original German neologism, coined by Illich himself, is: “Entbösung”.

49 Prodi, *op. cit.*, 2013, p. 31.

evil have become equally anonymous, anaemic, anomic.⁵⁰ But this, at the same time, explains Illich's radical position:

But I don't want to belong to this world. I want to feel myself as a stranger, a pilgrim, an outcast, a visitor, a prisoner. Yes, I'm talking about a pre-judice [Vor-Urteil], in other words, of a stand, no, not as *a* stand, about *my* stand [meiner Haltung]. A ground on which I'm standing [stehe], on which I'm *withstanding* [bestehe].⁵¹

Illich's very personal *withstanding* against the world, against this peculiar state of the world, this "Absurdistan, or hell-on-earth",⁵² grew out of the awareness that he was living in a world which has lost the sense for good, the Good. We have lost the certainty that the world makes sense because things fit together, that the eye is made to grasp the sunlight, and is not just a biological camera which happens to register this optical effect. We have lost the sense that virtuous behaviour is fitting and appropriate for human beings.⁵³

50 Cfr. *Mysterium iniquitatis*, in: Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, pp. 59-61, pp. 169-170.

51 Ivan Illich, Bremen, Vorlesung: 21.01.1999, cit. in: "Aber ich will nicht in diese Welt gehören..." *Beiträge zu einem konvivialen Denken nach Ivan Illich*, hrsg. von Marianne Gronemeyer, Reimer Gronemeyer, Charlotte Jurk, Marcus Jurk, Manuel Pensé, 2019 transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, p. 8: "Aber ich will nicht in diese Welt gehören. Ich will mich in ihr als Fremder, als Wanderer, als Außenseiter, als Besucher, als Gefangener fühlen. Ja, ich spreche von einem Vor-Urteil, also von einer Haltung, nein, nicht einer Haltung, meiner Haltung. Einem Grund, auf dem ich stehe, auf dem ich bestehe". Within this horizon, Illich is very close to what Erich Auerbach, in a famous essay translated by Edward Said, remarked on Hugh of Saint Victor, who was a key-figure in Illich's intellectual journey: "Delicatus ille est adhuc cui patria dulcis est, fortis autem cui omne solum patria est, perfectus vero cui mundus totus exilium est ..." [Didascalicon ch. III, cap. 20]. Hugo intended these lines for one whose aim is to free himself from a love of the world. But it is a good way also for one who wishes to earn a proper love for the world (in: *Philology and "Weltlitteratur"* by Erich Auerbach, translated by Maire and Edward Said, The Centennial Review, Vol. 13, No. 1, Winter 1969, pp. 1-17).

52 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 239, fn. 1.

53 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, pp. 62-63.

This apocalyptic worldview was not simply the expression of intellectual pessimism; it was the prophetic attitude of someone who had the capacity to read the present rather than the capacity to foresee the future. However, this prophetic attitude is possible only if two conditions are fulfilled. On one hand, someone must feel the irrevocable and almost painful *distance* between the present and the things which have passed, with “the pastness of the past”⁵⁴ and, on the other hand, the myths, expectations, and artificial paradises of so-called Modernity should not overshadow this exercise of mind and body. In other words, the prophet who looks back on the past to “prophesize” on the present should not be swallowed by the “shadow of the future”⁵⁵ Illich’s inquiry into the last days of Savonarola was precisely shaped by this double loop: he wanted to feel this historic experience, he wanted to be the magic mirror on which the present was not seen as the mere reflection of the past but as pure distance *to* the past. And only from this distance was the joy of surprise, as a prophetic act of an incarnated presence, possible.

If Savonarola could still consider himself a prophet, which exposed him to the temptation of power, Illich was ready to be *just* a friend and therefore renounce any form of power. His conscious act of powerlessness⁵⁶ allowed him to not only face power without being overwhelmed by it, but to also find a new path, a new possibility beyond any dialectic of history, beyond any revolution and counter-revolution, beyond any power and counter-power. Machiavelli was wrong when he said: “tutti e’ profeti armati vinsero e gli disarmati

54 *Declaration on Soil*. A joint statement, drafted in Hebenshausen, Germany, December 6, 1990, in collaboration with Sigmar Groeneveld, Lee Hoinacki and other friends.

55 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p.141.

56 Cfr. Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 182.

ruinorno”⁵⁷ because his notion of prophecy was strictly theocratic and power-oriented.⁵⁸ The prophet is, on the contrary, always someone who is in open conflict with the Powers of this World: whether it be the power of the State or the power of the Church. The idea of powerlessness is, therefore, the very essence of Illich’s attempt to pick up the vocation of prophecy in the new form of friendship. Or as Paolo Prodi points out about Savonarola: “in my opinion, he remained a prophet because he refused power as well as any utopia *à la mode*.⁵⁹

However, there is another point which links Illich to Savonarola: both had the will to testify their own life; in the sense *testimony* in old Greek had a specific name, μαρτύριον (martyrion). In fact, the notion of martyrdom was deeply embedded in the historical consciousness of them both. Savonarola said: “Io non voglio cappelli, non mitre ... Un cappello rosso, un cappello di sangue: questo desidero”⁶⁰, which means: “I don’t want any headdress, any mitre; a red headdress, a headdress stained with blood: this is what I want”. And Illich matched this stance when pointing out: “By every instance in which one of us associates himself plainly with the suffering of Christ, he might just trigger the end”.⁶¹ This capacity to trigger the end, this apocalyptic disposition to realize that the End is a possibility which can take place at any moment in *this* life is, at the same time, the particular

57 *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli, trans. into English by Luigi Ricci, Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1921, p. 22: “Thus it comes about that all armed prophets have conquered and unarmed ones failed”.

58 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, cap. VI: cft. “Moisé, Ciro, Teseo e Romulo” vs. “Ieronimo Savonerola”, in: Opere a.c.d. Rinaldo Rinaldi, Vol. I, Torino, UTET, 1999, p. 166.

59 Paolo Prodi, *Cuernavaca, estate 1966*, in: Rivista di storia del cristianesimo, No. 10, 2013, pp. 471-494; cit. in: Giuseppe Dossetti e le officine bolognesi, Il Mulino, 2016, p. 218: “... a mio parere, egli rimase un profeta rifiutando il potere e anche le utopie alla moda”.

60 Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Amos e Zaccaria*, cit. in: Medioevo latino. La cultura dell’Europa cristiana di Claudio Leonardi, Firenze, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 204, p. 714.

61 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 175.

condition which allows us “to discover God in one another”⁶²; this is the moment of the prophetic gaze which actually sees the present as the presence of God in the flesh of the other. When Illich evokes the historic scene of Savonarola’s brothers in prison, accepting the very moment in which they lived as the one which triggered the End, he comments: “They prophesize—but not with their promises, not with the threat of torments and not even with their suffering—the face of Jesus, which they disclose, and which is disclosed within them [as] the acceptance of powerlessness!”

The shattering and shocking claim that Savonarola, who was brutally tortured and condemned to slowly suffocate by hanging, had “una bella morte”, a *beautiful death*, is something which must be understood within the boundaries of this particular spiritual horizon; a horizon, where the art of living was co-existing, reflecting, and embracing the art of suffering:

I strongly suspect that a contemporary art of living can be recovered. I believe in the art of suffering, in the art of dying, in the art of living, and, so long as it is in an austere and clear-sighted way, in the art of enjoyment, the art of living it up [...] The only hope for the life which I’m seeking rests upon rejection of sentimentality and openness to surprise.⁶³

This *openness to surprise* was Illich’s *Holzweg*,⁶⁴ a wooden path which leads nowhere, or better, which leads outside the border of what is known, and therefore remains open for the wandering joy of being surprised by the possibility of

62 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 176.

63 Illich, *op. cit.*, 1992, pp. 189-190.

64 Illich uses this term, well knowing the Heideggerian notion and interpretation of this term.

friendship. As he keenly confessed: “And my road has been one of friendship”.⁶⁵

The *Holzweg* of his “foolish renunciations”,⁶⁶ which was also the road of his notion of friendship, was also the path of the fool of God, of the *stultus in deo*, a god-blessed clown, prophesizing, not as a prophet but as a friend, the *hic et nunc* of the human condition. The prophetic gaze of friendship gave him the grace not to be blinded by the shadow which our future throws.⁶⁷ And together with Savonarola, this hidden long-life companion, he knew: “Maior est abyssus misericordiae quam abyssum miseriae”,⁶⁸ which in a more Illichian sense could be also expressed: *maior est abyssus amicitiae quam abyssum miseriae*, the abyss of friendship is greater than the abyss of misery.

Illich’s speech of 1997, beneath Savonarola’s nose, gave him the occasion to state again his joyful foolishness, as a true Christian, or perhaps even as the *last* Christian in this sense, a foolishness which allowed him to say once again: “For, behold, the kingdom of God is among you”⁶⁹ against the perverted and secularized Christian idea of a Heaven on Earth: “where we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come”,⁷⁰ by acknowledging that:

We have to engage in an asceticism which makes it possible to savour nowness and hereness, here as place, here as that which is between us, as the Kingdom is.⁷¹

65 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 152.

66 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 170.

67 Cfr. “*The Shadow Our Future Throws*”: an interview with Illich, in: *New Perspectives Quarterly* 6, No. 1, Spring 1989, pp. 20-26.

68 *Fratris Hieronymi Savonarolae Ferrarensis Expositiones in psalmos*, 1517, Venetiis, XVIII [v].

69 Saint James Bible, Luke, 17: 21.

70 Saint James Bible, Heb., 13: 14.

71 Illich/ Cayley, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 177.