

## **The Many Challenges of Italian Theory**

### *A Case of Lunacy?*

A few years ago a student e-mailed me, asking if I wanted to be his thesis co-advisor. His knowledge of Italian, interest in aesthetics, and familiarity with continental philosophy had led him to the unusual choice of Giovanni Gentile's *The Philosophy of Art* as the subject of his work, and he needed the assistance of someone who had first-hand knowledge of Italian philosophical texts. Gentile's *La filosofia dell'arte* had been translated in 1972, but it had failed to generate interest in the English-speaking world, and the student's advisor was not familiar with it. Agreeing to be the student's co-advisor was a learning experience, for I felt obliged to read the book carefully — otherwise, I must admit, it would not have made my reading list at the time. During the defense, which took place in the student's university, the advisor who was sitting between me and the student remained largely silent, turning her head once in my direction, once in the direction of the student as if she were watching a tennis game. An expert in aesthetics, she made no mystery about her unwillingness to close her knowledge gap in Italian Neo-Idealism, and I felt no inclination to blame her. However, as the student and I were discussing Gentile's concept of self-translation (*autotraduzione*), possibly one his most innovative ideas (*La filosofia dell'arte* 240-43), she abruptly asked the two of us: "But do you guys really take this lunatic seriously?"

I did not want to plunge into a heated discussion on the relevance of Gentile's thought in 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy, certainly not at the expense of the student who needed to have his thesis graded and be done with it. Half-smiling, I said that yes, Gentile was keen to use an outdated, late-romantic language that here and there needed to be "translated" even for an Italian reader, but he was also making some interesting points that would not have been out of place in the contemporary debate on the arts. She did not seem convinced, but accepted the thesis nonetheless, and the student was free to move on to the next stage of his career.

But why "lunatic"? What is there in Gentile's *Filosofia dell'arte* that might associate him with that unforgiving definition? Was it because of his long-lasting allegiance to the Fascist regime? Gentile's politics never surfaced in our discussion, his loyalty to Fascism was not even mentioned, and besides, his thoughts on the nature of the arts are remarkably unencumbered by political overtones. If ever, his advocacy for an art that engages in the whole human arena, without excluding ethics, religion, and politics (in opposition to Croce's

quasi-Orphic aesthetic of intuition), might find consensus even in political fields that stands in strong opposition to Fascism. It may sound outrageous to say so, but is Gentile's idea of art as a living form that participates in the real world so far removed from, say, John Dewey's *Art as Experience*? Both wrote their books in the early 1930s. Despite their vast political and theoretical differences, both Gentile and Dewey were trained in Hegelian dialectic, did not think according to binary logic, and regarded culture and society as a system in which every element is conjoined. As one of the last American Hegelians, and especially after the 1960s, Dewey was probably more widely read in Italy than in the U. S. Italy, after all, has had a long love affair with American pragmatism, dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century, and Dewey had a large pedagogical influence in Italy at the time when the Italian departments of philosophy (then called *Istituti*) were trying to unburden themselves of their Crocean (and Gentilean) legacy without discarding Hegelian dialectic. As a matter of fact, Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty*, together with Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, was on the reading list of a class in History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy that I took in 1976 at the Università degli Studi in Milan.

Still, the "lunatic" thing had me worried. By sheer semantic association, I was reminded of a well-known passage in *Mere Christianity* where C. S. Lewis compares Jesus Christ to a lunatic: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said [...] would either be a lunatic [...] or else he would be the Devil of Hell" (31). Lewis's answer to the conundrum is hardly satisfying: "Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God" (31). As any philosophy freshman can see, this is a conspicuous case of circular reasoning, where the proposition to be proved is assumed in the premises: "J.C. is either a madman or God, but since he is not a madman, then he is God." C. S. Lewis was a great inspirational writer, but a lousy logician.

What has it to do with poor Gentile? Not to bestow any sainthood on him, but the lesson I learned from the thesis episode was that a professor trained in the philosophy of mind needs a leap of faith of truly Lewisian proportions to digest the language of continental philosophy. In other words: either Gentile was a respectable thinker, or else he was a madman. And to accept the view that he was a respectable thinker we must assume (by means of circular reasoning) that he was not a madman, and that what he wrote was not the result of his lunacy.

Now, I would not be so sure that the accusation of lunacy can be lifted from *each and every thing* Gentile said or did in his very busy and controversial life, but this is beside the point. The point may very well be that in the eyes of the current British-American hegemony of analytical philosophy and cognitivism, all continental philosophers are lunatic. And yet their ideas travel well beyond the walls of academia and touch the lives of people in a way that the more rarefied academic production cannot achieve. It is not just a matter of

suspending our logical requirements. It is a matter of translation — including, when necessary, self-translation, or, in Gentile’s words, “each one of us needs to translate to him/herself what s/he wrote yesterday” (“Ognuno di noi ha bisogno di tradurre a se stesso quello che scrisse ieri,” 241, my rendering).

*An Act of Love*

Italian philosophy needs to be translated on many levels. If I did not know, I learned it while I was editing Massimo Cacciari’s *The Unpolitical* (2009). The more the translator sent me version after version of his excellent work, the more I realized that Cacciari’s prose, multilayered, polyglot, and allusive as it is, needed first (at least in my mind) to be translated from Cacciari’s style into plain Italian, then from Italian into a mirror-like English image, and from that mirror image into (relatively) plain English. The linguistic complexity and the endless game of Latin, Greek, French, and German references in the prose of several Italian philosophers are not mere ornaments. As annoying as they may seem to the impatient reader, their lexical and syntactic acrobatics are part and parcel of the texture of discourse. For a long time Italian philosophy used to be a very selective environment, almost exclusively male (things have changed lately, but not enough, not yet). It created tight schools of thought, each one developing its own idiolects and semiotic grids. Obviously, loyalty to one’s master, gratitude, anxiety of influence, and the desire to break free co-exist within every serious thinker. One cannot fully understand Gianni Vattimo and Sergio Givone without knowing that they have been (and maybe still are) in constant, silent conversation with Luigi Pareyson. In the imaginary community that we all have inside our heads, Carlo Sini is conversing with Enzo Paci, who was conversing with Antonio Banfi, who was conversing with Piero Martinetti. Emanuele Severino’s “outrageous” belief in the non-created eternity of all beings and his relentless criticism of the insufficient “logic of becoming” (which in his opinion has plagued the entire history of the West) are much more comprehensible if placed in the context of the painful rift he had with his mentor, Neoscholastic philosopher Gustavo Bontadini, who recognized the contradictoriness of becoming inside the logic of Parmenidean Being only to resolve every contradiction in God, where beings are both created and eternal.

Does one need to know all these historical intricacies in order to appreciate the philosophical books written in Italy? A certain degree of inner knowledge is required in the understanding of all strong traditions. Yet, if Italian philosophical language is well-guarded, and at times bordering on the esoteric (so are French and German, but they carry more authority), the reason is not that Italian thinkers write for an inner circle, but that they expect their loftiness to be understood, or at least appreciated, by a larger audience. And their hope is not unfounded.

Gentile’s 1923 idealistic reform of the high school system may have been a blessing or a curse; the debate is still open. At any rate, it has made Italy a

country where every student who attends *liceo* takes three years of mandatory philosophy (11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> grade), and no reform based on the latest development in American pedagogy has managed so far to take away the centrality of the humanities from Italian education. As a result, Italian philosophers are sought after by mainstream publishers, write newspaper op-eds, are invited to TV cultural programs, debate publicly in packed theatres, take positions on current issues and participate in the political life (Cacciari and Vattimo are a recent case in point, but let us not forget that after World War II Antonio Banfi was twice a senator, leaving behind a substantial *corpus* of political writings and speeches). They can speak jargon-free if they want (and many of them do), but when they hit the high note in a public lecture or in a newspaper article, it is because of an unspoken agreement between aristocratic esotericism and populist expectation. Their audiences expect ornate style from them the way you expect a well-known classical pianist to wear a tuxedo and a bow-tie even though he is performing in the auditorium of your local school, or the way you want a famous preacher to run the gamut of his theatrical skills even when he is preaching in a barnyard.

In Italian philosophical literature you will not find statements such as “Here is where I part way from Kant” or “I am in total disagreement with Hegel on this specific issue” — statements I have often found in analytical literature, as if Kant or Hegel were the not-so-bright colleagues from a rival department. Such healthy demonstrations that nothing is sacred (I do find them healthy, to a point) are anathema to the Italian philosopher, for whom the canonic texts can be endlessly questioned, criticized, retranslated, reinterpreted, turned upside down and forced to perform outrageous hermeneutic stunts, but they cannot be dismissed. Italian philosophers will never say, “Here is where Nietzsche was wrong.” They would rather say that on that specific issue Nietzsche was mistranslated, or the more hidden meaning of that specific passage has never been brought to light the way it was supposed to be. If you find a few moments of sublime pedantry in the articles collected in this volume, please keep in mind that pedantry too is an act of love. At the end of the 1980s Umberto Eco, in *The Limits of Interpretation*, tried to undermine Derrida’s deconstruction by arguing that C. S. Peirce’s “unlimited semiosis” was not meant to say that, as in the Cole Porter’s song, “anything goes.” He did not realize, however, that the enemy was within, and that his colleagues in the philosophy departments were shrewder deconstructionists than he ever imagined. The trick (and the reason why deconstruction has taken less root in Italy than in the U.S.) was that they were ruining the sacred texts in order to reconstruct them, and to keep the canon’s poetic greatness alive through endlessly sophisticated, byzantine, casuistic, hair-splitting re-readings.

*Trans-Atlantic Misreadings*

So far, I have referred to the Italian authors included in this volume as philosophers and not as critical theorists, a term rarely used in Italy. Although analytical philosophy and philosophy of the mind are becoming increasingly visible in Italian universities, “philosophy” is still an all-encompassing word, inclusive of all that passes for literary theory or critical theory in the Anglo-Saxon world. Diverse readerships, however, harbor diverse expectations. Italian philosophy assumes a different profile when it is read within the critical theory or literary theory frameworks. The question, “How can you read Vattimo without Pareyson?” may pale in comparison to “How could you read Derrida without Husserl?” And yet we have seen how Derrida’s progress from phenomenology to grammatology has been put in a straight jacket to fit the glorious misreading of a philosophical critique turned overnight into literary criticism. I am not defending the primacy of philosophy at all costs. The American misreading of Derrida has been fun some times, infuriating some other times, and over all productive to the extent that it has kept up the level of the debate, pushing it toward unexpected twists and turns.

There is, however, a dangerous reductionism at work when philosophy becomes synonymous with critical theory. For philosophy is not just criticism, it is not an item of culture, one among the many that are available on the cultural market. As Kant would say, after criticism comes dogmatism, that is to say, after the *pars destruens* comes the *pars construens*, the propositions directly derived from concepts that can be formulated only after the critique on the possibility of such propositions has been completed.<sup>1</sup> In a world dominated by made-to-order social sciences and departments of communication in which no one ever questions what communication is, philosophy’s epistemological status is at risk every time the emphasis is placed on criticism alone.

At the end of the 1980s when I moved to the United States, I found myself amidst Vattimo’s peak of popularity in the Italian departments. His notion of “weak thought” (in a nutshell, that Western metaphysics from Plato to Heidegger was now exhausted and could be kept alive only in a survival mode), was getting high recognition, and I honestly wondered why. A few years before, in seminars I had attended in Italy I had witnessed spirited discussions on weak thought between Vattimo and his colleagues, and I was inclined to agree with their criticism, namely, that Vattimo’s weak thought was a cop-out, a retreat from what we might call, again in Kant’s severe words, “the Herculean labor of self-knowledge, which goes from the bottom up” (*On A Newly Arisen Superior*

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<sup>1</sup> “[...] critique is the preliminary operation necessary for promoting a metaphysics that is well-founded and [thus] a science. Such a metaphysics must necessarily be carried out dogmatically, and systematically according to the strictest demand, and hence carried out in a way that complies with school standards (rather than in a popular way)” (“Preface,” 34).

*Tone*, 53). To be sure, Pier Aldo Rovatti and Alessandro Dal Lago were championing the progressive features of weak thought. In their view, weak thought had abandoned neither the hermeneutic practice of suspicion nor the critique of ideology; only, it refused to share in the game of power (which is easy to say when you are a tenured professor, but let's move on). Vattimo's position, however, did not look so combative: his "recollection in tranquility" (to loosely quote Wordsworth, 449) of philosophy's glorious past was playing well in the Italian disillusioned political landscape of the 1980s, but one could not avoid comparing the new, subdued Vattimo, who spoke of weakness (*debolezza*), modesty or restraint (*pudore*), and *pietas* as the latter-day philosophical virtues, with his aggressive, liberating reading of Nietzsche just ten years before (*Il soggetto e la maschera*, or *Nietzsche: An Introduction*). And why was Vattimo's trip back to memory lane being welcomed enthusiastically by American academia, which was supposed to thrive on innovation, edginess, and audacious appropriations?

On the one hand, the U.S. Italian departments were becoming increasingly populated by young assistant professors who showed less and less interest in traditional literary criticism and were hungry for theory, any theory that would make modern Italian studies look less backward in comparison with the French departments or comparative literature. On the other hand, weakness and modesty were welcome categories among the growing number of feminist, gay, and lesbian scholars (inside and outside Italian studies) now in competition with old-fashioned male professors who were anything but weak and meek. Aside from considerations that pertain to the sociology of academia, another interesting misreading has happened in more recent years with Giorgio Agamben. How has it happened that such a pessimistic, brooding, "passivistic" (passivity looms large in his philosophy), quasi-nihilist thinker has been championed as a progressive, democratic intellectual, open to the project of endlessly renegotiating and empowering marginal subjects? Agamben's political theory could be summarized in the ancient Chuang-tzu saying, "there has never been such a thing as governing mankind with success" (Rothbard, 46), yet his negative theology has been quickly reinscribed in the Great False Hope that we (the academics) will always be left free to question our intellectual, ethnic, and sexual identities till the end of time. Perhaps the impact of his *Coming Community* (translated into English in 1993), with its mild utopian *élan*, contributed to coloring in pastel hues everything he wrote afterwards. The coming community has not come, of course, but the academic community correctly understood that Agamben was speaking of them, the *ecclesia militans*, who could project itself onto the celestial image of the always-marching-forward, always-coming-on-a-cloud *ecclesia triumphans*, shining like armor in the apocalyptic hour when all differences will be exalted — and simultaneously wiped out.

When different communities exchange complex theories, the give and take does not necessarily occur within the same timeframe or according to the identical hermeneutic context. Edward Said's notion of "traveling theory" needs to be grafted onto Ernst Bloch's concept of historical non-contemporaneity (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*). Theories travel in time as well as they travel in space, toward their demise on a forgotten shore or their revitalization under a different sky. There were vital reasons for Italianists in America to discuss Vattimo's weak thought according to the frames of reference of feminism and queer studies that were not a widespread topic in Italy at the time. And the same can be said for Agamben's daring re-readings of every rivulet of Western tradition, even when his undisputable essayistic brilliance obscures the harsh content.

*How This Volume Came into Being (or Started Becoming)*

When Professor Dino Cervigni asked me if I wanted to be the guest editor of *Annali d'Italianistica's* 29<sup>th</sup> issue (an opportunity for which I am very grateful to him), my first thought was that I wanted to assemble a volume of Italian philosophers and theorists together with contributions on Italian theory from the U.S. and whatever country the submissions would come. I sent a first round of e-mail messages to Italy, hoping that at least half of the addressees would answer. The response largely exceeded my expectations, and very soon I received fourteen excellent papers from philosophers and scholars in different disciplines. Since it was imperative to me that all the contributions had to be in English or translated into English, I quickly realized that I was already straining my budget for translators and assistants, and that I could not afford to send another salvo of e-mails. I also wanted to leave half of the volume to critical contributions on Italian theory from non-Italian scholars, or Italian scholars who were not operating in Italy. Vattimo and Agamben do not appear directly in this volume, but the reader will enjoy Thomas J. Harrison's insightful "parallel lives" of the "two Giannis" (Celati and Vattimo), in its mixture of literature and philosophy, as well as Paolo Bartoloni's, Colby Dickinson's, and Joseph Luzzi's engaging takes on different sides of Agamben's work (while Francesco Chillemi makes use of Agamben to expound on the philosophical implications of Carmelo Bene's theatre). I regret that the authors who would have made my second round are not included here, but I am very glad to have received significant contributions from Massimo Cacciari, Adriana Cavarero, Roberta De Monticelli, Roberto Esposito, Mario Perniola, Emanuele Severino, and Carlo Sini. As for Maurizio Cecchetti, Massimo Donà, Federico Leoni, Guido Oldani, Rocco Ronchi, Giulia Santi, and Francesco Tomatis (Cecchetti is an art critic, Oldani is a poet, the others are representative of the "new wave" in Italian philosophy), this is the first time that a chunk of their work has been made accessible to the English-speaking readership, and I am very thankful to *Annali d'Italianistica*, the Small Grant Program of the University of Houston, and the Ugo Di Portanova Italian Studies Development Fund for the opportunity they

have given me to widen the awareness of the theoretical and critical work being done in Italy. I am also extremely grateful to Andreola Rossi, who went through the first editing of the translations, and to all the translators: Steve Baker, Thomas Behr, Susanna De Maria, Giovanna Gioli, Justin L. Harmon (also one of the authors), Andrea Malaguti, George Metcalf, Santo Pettinato, Anne Tordi (also Prof. Cervigni's collaborator), and Massimo Verdicchio.

The volume spontaneously organized around four major areas: Metaphysics (which I called "Theoretical Workshop," since Italian philosophers think of metaphysical themes under the banner of "filosofia teoretica"); "Ethics and Bioethics; Politics and Biopolitics" (including moral philosophy and gender issues); and "Literature and the Arts," where I have collected articles that cross over from theory into literature, theatre, and architecture or, in the case of Mario Perniola, combine philosophical background and personal essay. Paolo Valesio's paper on poetry and mysticism is almost unique in this context (but fully in the spirit of the critical work he has pursued in the last twenty years) in that it addresses literature-as-a-theory-in-and-of-itself, exploring "the literature of theory" within the very body of literature instead of looking for theoretical perspectives from an external point of view. In the last section, "History and Geography of Italian Theory," I have grouped comprehensive overviews of historical periods or specific issues. For the benefit of the reader, I will introduce now the main themes of the first and second section, with references to the fourth.

Cacciari's "History and Destiny" addresses the transcendence of history, beginning with Wilhelm Dilthey and Jacob Burckhardt and then going all the way back to Herodotus. Not only is the topic crucial to the historicist legacy of Italian philosophy, but it also tackles the very historicization of Being (from Dilthey to Heidegger) that has been the dominant theme in the European philosophy of the twentieth century. Donà's article is in many ways related to Severino's. Whereas Severino compresses in the space of a lecture his complex revisionism of Western philosophy, affirming (on the basis of Parmenides's clear-cut division between Being and nothingness) that Becoming is the peculiar illusion — in fact the Folly of the West — and that Being cannot be historicized (otherwise it would turn into Becoming, and therefore into nothingness), Donà (a student of Severino and Cacciari) argues that not even Parmenides was able to establish a total separation between Being and nothingness, and that an absolute negation of Being is perhaps unattainable within the limits of our language and logic. Carlo Sini's contribution summarizes in a few pages the philosopher's groundbreaking, post-Derridean grammatology (actually pre-Derridean, since its genealogy goes back to C. S. Peirce and Vico). Contrary to what our "metaphysical" common sense suggests to us ("common sense" meaning our unaware, everyday Aristotelianism), there are no such things as "things" unless they are mediated, brought to us, interpreted through signs, and the solemn categories that we take for granted, such as Being, nothingness, presence,

subject, object, and similar ones, are “effects of writing” or, to be precise, outcomes of the most powerful artificial intelligence machine that mankind has ever created, namely, the phonetic alphabet adopted by the Greeks and subsequently by the whole West. Rocco Ronchi’s article is related to Sini’s (Ronchi has been his student) but in a subtle way. Instead of insisting on the efficacy of alphabetic writing in shaping our very notions of reality, Ronchi takes an openly Bergsonian and ultimately Platonic approach, which starts, in true phenomenological fashion, with the description of a common experience, namely, the feeling of having forgotten something, or of having something “on the tip of our tongue” without being able to utter it. And yet when we do not remember “something” we are haunted by “something else,” a non-contingent knowledge much larger than the small something we have forgotten. In the experience of oblivion lies, therefore, the key that can open the door to the understanding of what philosophy is really about, which cannot be but the quest for truth.

Francesco Tomatis’s article discusses the legacy of Luigi Pareyson, the Christian existentialist whose work has just begun to appear in English. A student of Pareyson, Tomatis highlights the formidable complexities and existential *pathos* that overflow from Pareyson’s idiosyncratic yet truly strong reading of Schelling and Dostoevsky. Pareyson’s philosophy, in Tomatis’s dense account, culminates in a problematic, daunting ontology of free will that aims at the status of a tragic theodicy, namely, the theodicy of evil *in* God.

#### *A Case of Objectophobia*

The transcription of Enzo Paci’s discussion with his students on Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’eclisse*, which opens this volume, is the only period piece I have included. I thank Andrea Malaguti for directing my attention to it and even more for translating it. The debate took place in 1962, at the height of Italy’s economic miracle, when the nation was going through a breathtaking process of modernization and industrialization, very much like the one India, China, and Brazil are experiencing now. It was also the heyday of the so-called “deprovincialization” of Italian philosophy. Enzo Paci, whose teaching had brought together Vichian humanism, phenomenology, Marxism, and existentialism, and whose charismatic persona dominated Milanese cultural life, was also the first philosopher, even before Eco, who opened up the heavy doors of Italian academia to new areas later called cultural studies. It is very likely that *L’eclisse* was the first film discussed in a philosophy class in an Italian university. Two years later, in 1964, when Paci invited Michelangelo Antonioni and Monica Vitti to participate in a panel on the recently released *Il deserto rosso*, his more conservative colleagues in the humanities departments were positively horrified. When I read the transcription of the debate, just looking at the names of the young students who took part in that discussion brought back memories. Not only because of Enzo Paci, whom I remember vividly and whose

last class I attended in 1976-1977, shortly before he passed away, but also because of Andrea Bonomi, with whom I took a class in the philosophy of language, and most of all because of Liliana Valcarengi, who was my second *liceo* professor of philosophy, and always spoke fondly of Paci. The first philosophy teacher I had, Don Enrico Corradi, was a priest and a student of Gustavo Bontadini. Both Corradi and Valcarengi taught us students the basics, of course, but they also told us who they were, where they came from, with whom and what they had studied. I consider myself extremely lucky to have been exposed, at such a young age, to glimpses of Neoscholasticism and Phenomenology, two of the most engaging schools of thought then competing in the city's philosophical scene. Now of course I have colleagues who tell me that higher education is wasted on the young, that European schools have been designed by crazy elitists, and that you cannot possibly get a grip on metaphysics or logic when you are in your teens. Certainly not, if no one is even allowed to try to teach these subjects to you.

There is a curious thread connecting the *Eclisse* debate with Cecchetti's and Oldani's contributions. Paci and his students worried a lot about the increasing role of "objects" in everyday life, and identified Antonioni's film as the most accurate diagnosis of that peculiarly modern disease. An ambivalent poetry of objects was lingering in the air in those days, from the *poetica degli oggetti* Luciano Anceschi had identified in the poets of the so-called "lombardic line" (*La linea lombarda*, 1952) to the still-life frames of objects interrupting the flow of action in François Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962). In his essay, *Il mare dell'oggettività* (1960), Italo Calvino also remarked, with fascination and alarm, that the French novelists of the new *école du regard* told their stories more through objects than through characters (Calvino's title, in fact, means "A Sea of Objects" more than it means "The Sea of Objectivity"). Yet it was only with Antonioni's *L'eclisse* that objects showed their fully threatening, vampiresque side, as if they were now ready to "objectify" and ultimately substitute the human beings. As it seemed back then, the traditional categories of subjectivity (conscience, judgment, will) were being replaced by a terrifying reification of the "I" brought on by the all-pervasive capitalism that in a few years had taken over Italy.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Italians were still getting acquainted with having so many objects around. Cars, radios, telephones, TV sets, and domestic appliances were making their triumphal entrance in Italian households, from the upper middle-class luxury apartments to the working-class housing projects. *Bourgeoisie* families always had a lot of things, but they were not objects: they were possessions, handed-down from one generation to another. You felt you owned them, but objects were different: they owned you. They were inanimate, yet they occupied your mind more than horses and pets. This severe case of objectophobia has never gone away. You see it all over the place in Cecchetti's article about architecture's abject surrender to design and buildings turned into

gigantic objects, the first of this kind being Giò Ponti's Pirelli Tower in Milan, which architecture critic Bruno Zevi (as Cecchetti recalls) dismissed in 1960 as "a liquor cabinet blown up to the scale of a skyscraper." And you see the same objectophobia (which now should be called, more precisely, "gadgetophobia") in Oldani's account of how objects-gadgets have sucked up our life and turned us into their slaves, to the point that future poetry (or "terminal realism," in Oldani's definition) either will take up the task of describing the reality of our enslavement or will cease its function altogether.

I agree with these authors only to a point, but I sense in them a cultural symptom that cannot be dismissed. It is not by chance that Italy had Mario Merz's *arte povera* and its subversive, unadorned found objects and not Andy Warhol's glamorous serializations of Campbell Soup cans and Marilyn Monroe's portraits. No matter how many cellphones Italians have in their pockets (one of the highest percentages in the world), Warhol's unapologetic liturgy of capitalism would have never originated in Italy. The American reader who smiles at this object-generated anxiety must understand that the guilt feeling of Italian intellectuals for having caved in to unabashed capitalism still runs very deep. Pasolini never died, he just left the building. You can also feel the same anxiety, at a more sophisticated level, in Severino's criticism of technics and technology, which is even more radical than Heidegger's.

#### *Beyond National Philosophy*

In my young days I was taught that there was no such thing as national philosophy. Italian philosophy belonged to the major trends of European philosophy and European philosophy, regardless of all its internal divisions, was no different in substance from Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*, which at the end of the eighteenth century meant an idealized image of the European republic of letters. In 1973, when I enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy of the "Statale," as the Università degli Studi is called in Milan, the deprovincialization of Italian philosophy was a thing of the past, like post-World War II reconstruction and the Marshall Plan. I remember when Enzo Paci, in the fall of 1976, told us students of the last time he had been in Paris and had had lunch with Jean-Paul Sartre, taking notes of everything Sartre was saying. His humility (which was part of his charisma, by the way) seemed excessive to me and a few others I exchanged bemused glances with. The next generation was not so humble. Although Italy could boast no Gadamer, Foucault, or Derrida, younger thinkers met on equal terms with their French and German colleagues. There was indeed a European philosophy, before it became just continental. But that was before Antonio Gramsci's *Southern Question* was reread as a forerunner to Homi Bhabha's *Location of Culture*, and the whole debate on the Hegemonic North and the Global South began. There is no national philosophy — I still believe that — but there is localized philosophy. There is a philosophy that has a point of view, a location from which it looks at the objects of its inquiry. The Italian

point of view may be the practical attitude that dates back to Cicero, Leon Battista Alberti, and Machiavelli. It may also be the lofty, historicist, Idealist and/or Marxist tradition that always resurfaces, often at odds with the hands-on Ciceronian legacy. Today, however, Italian philosophers are looking for a way out from the trappings of an already exhausted post-modernity, either through the diagnosis of the Western “Folly” (Severino), the genealogy of writing (Sini), the questioning of belief, faith, and secularization (the most recent Vattimo), or the search for the limits and effectiveness of political action (Agamben, Cacciari, Negri). And here is where the fourth section of this volume, “History and Geography of Italian Theory,” comes into play. The articles by Norma Bouchard, Justin L. Harmon, Massimo Lollini, Tullio Pagano, Francesca Parmeggiani, Rocco Rubini, and Giulia Santi all walk the fine line between historiography and theoretical assessment, connecting individual intellectual journeys to the larger picture of national themes and development.

It is in the arena of biopolitics, however, that contemporary Italian philosophy has grabbed the bull by the horns. The second section is precisely dedicated to the interlacing of (bio)ethics and (bio)politics. What Giorgio Agamben (the subject of Bartoloni’s and Dickinson’s papers), Adriana Cavarero, Roberta De Monticelli, Roberto Esposito, Federico Leoni, and Rocco Ronchi have to say is definitely Italian and, at the same time, cannot be read along the lines of national philosophy, but only in the context of the most up-to-date literature on the topic, be it European, American, or Asian. Cavarero’s contribution to Judith Butler’s critique of the “peaceful subject” highlights significant points of the debate over Butler on both sides of the Atlantic. De Monticelli is a phenomenologist who has engaged in a stringent debate with the neurosciences, and her analysis and critique of the Libet and Haynes experiments, which have cast a dismal light on the cherished notion of free will, should be meditated upon by anyone who dismisses the contribution of plain, old philosophy to the field of cognitive science. Leoni and Ronchi’s article on the genealogy of bioethics is meant to generate discussion, and I hope it will. Their criticism strikes with razor’s precision at the “fetishes of life” that plague both secular and religious approaches to bioethics, and whoever remembers the self-righteous noise that surrounded the Terry Schiavo case in the U.S. and the Eluana Englaro case in Italy will not fail to see how the authors have dispelled much of the ideological smoke that lingered on both sides of the issue. Esposito’s article, for its part, is a lucid, engaging *précis* of the author’s journey from biopolitics to community, and from community to immunity — a new perspective in political philosophy that is receiving more and more recognition by the day. It goes to Esposito’s credit that he has extracted the notion of immunity from the language of the medical field and turned it into a powerful tool for biopolitical analysis, going beyond where Foucault had stopped.

Recently, both Negri (*La differenza italiana*) and Chiesa with Toscano (*The Italian Difference*) have highlighted the reasons why the Italian nation is the

“internal other” of Europe. Federico Luisetti’s article pushes the concept in the direction of an “Italian anomaly” linked to the hegemonic media populism Italy has experienced in the last twenty years. Luisetti, however, aims to transcend the sociological analysis. The apparent failure of democracy to politicize responsibly its citizens (as in the “drink responsibly” or “drive responsibly” ads, I would say), is as much an Italian problem as it is a European and American one. If there is neither national philosophy nor national literature (nowadays there is only ethnic and global), perhaps there are no longer Italian differences that are solely Italian. The Italian anomaly will not end with Prime Minister Berlusconi’s demise. Whatever malady Italy suffers from, it is the West’s malady now.

*The Salesman’s Pitch*

In *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), when Edward G. Robinson tells Fred McMurray, “You’re too good to be a salesman,” McMurray’s response is the immortal line, “No one’s too good to be a salesman.” Aren’t we all salesmen and saleswomen now, regardless of our profession? My undergraduate students, encouraged by the current anti-intellectual climate, think of themselves as customers and of their teachers as purveyors. When I teach Italian literature or cinema, Italy is the item I have to pitch. Italian theory is just the new item to reach the shelves, and thank God there are customers. Colleagues from other departments ask me if I have read Agamben’s or Esposito’s latest book, and want to know when the English translation will be available. Let us recall then the time when philosophy coming from Italy, with the exceptions of Vico, Croce, and Gramsci, was an unknown entity. Things began to change in the mid-1980s, and Peter Carravetta must be given praise for starting the publication of *Differentia. Review of Italian Thought* in 1986, when it was still a pioneer’s work. In 1988, the release of Giovanna Borradori’s anthology *Recoding Metaphysics* and of Vattimo’s *The End of Modernity* signaled that the post-war Italian generation was ready to join the theoretical debate going on this side of the Atlantic. A few years later, the already mentioned publication of Agamben’s *The Coming Community* (1993), immediately followed by other translations, made the philosopher a household name. The appearance of Sini’s *Images of Truth* (1993), Cacciari’s *Necessary Angel* (1994), Perniola’s *Enigmas* (1995), Cavarero’s *In Spite of Plato* (1995), and other books from the same authors culminated in the best-selling status of Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (2001). It was now clear that the post-modern theoretical landscape had to make room for a new guest. Recently, Brian Schroeder’s and Silvia Benso’s anthology, *Contemporary Italian Philosophy* (2007), has charted an exceptionally varied land, whose richness is second to none in terms of ambition and subtlety.

In the “works cited” paragraph at the end of this article I have not included all the English translations from the work of contemporary Italian thinkers; these

would be too many. I have listed, however, Italian books that give an overview of today's Italian philosophy, together with English and American recent volumes whose subject is Italian philosophy or a specific Italian philosopher. The list is long, and it could have been longer.

End of the salesman's pitch. Actually no, there is one more thing: four American presses are currently vying for the publication rights of Esposito's *Pensiero vivente. Origine e attualità della filosofia italiana* (2010), the best introduction to Italian cultural identity (not only philosophy; see the chapters on Dante, Leonardo, Cuoco, Leopardi, De Sanctis, and Pasolini) that a graduate student can find today. As much as Esposito's is a welcome and essential book, I hope a sequel will not be necessary. In fact, if *Pensiero vivente* is the last book of its kind, it will fulfill its aim. In his notes on the *Risorgimento*, Gramsci pointed out that the best feature of the Italian intellectual has always been his international vocation as a "worker and producer of civilization" ("lavoratore e produttore di civiltà," *Quaderno 9, Par. 127*, 1190). There must come a time when Italian theory is just theory, part of the world's intellectual enterprise, without mandatory and ultimately reductionist references to Italian traits or national character, which often end up assuming an essentialist, ethnic, or fashionably Mediterranean connotation. To the readers of this book, however, this is no concern. Here are some thinkers who happen to be Italian. If you find them engaging, wait for more, because more will come.

Besides, things are moving fast, and the landscape of Western philosophy and/or theory is changing by the minute. While I am writing this introduction the Italian philosophical community is being rattled by a debate between Gianni Vattimo and Maurizio Ferraris, his now heretic disciple (*La Repubblica*, August 19, 2011). The point of contention is the efficacy of hermeneutics. In the new realism (*nuovo realismo*) that Ferraris advocates, there is no room left for the old Nietzschean tenet, "there are no facts, only interpretations." Growing up as I did at the school of Carlo Sini, who combined Nietzsche's hermeneutics with Foucault's genealogy, a very Vichian brand of grammatology, and C. S. Peirce's unlimited semiosis, I have been familiar with that tenet enough to understand that it has always been skillfully used to bring easy charges of relativism upon anybody who suspected that he had been had. Nietzsche, let us not forget, was a supreme *provocateur*.<sup>2</sup> Interpretations are also facts, what else could they be? They are the necessary inferences we must process in our daily life in order to fulfill the most basic actions. There is nothing relativistic about them. If I walk

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<sup>2</sup> The complete quote puts the statement in the appropriate context: "Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying 'there are only facts,' I should say: no, it is precisely facts that do not exist, only interpretations...." From the posthumous fragments, summer 1886-fall 1887 (*The Portable Nietzsche*, 458).

into a room and I wish to sit down, I need to “interpret” correctly which object will function for me as a chair or a sofa. When the critics of hermeneutics lash out against relativism, their straw man is a made-to-measure reduction of Nietzsche’s remark, together with a careful avoidance of Peirce’s logic of inference.

Of course, if we decide to push our inner Nietzsche to the point of making him say that what for me is a chair is a kettle for you, we cannot be functional beings. And in fact what makes our societies dysfunctional today is that relativism has become the new norm. Not so much among philosophers, but in the media landscape and in the political debate. Ferraris’s adoption of an almost pre-Kantian notion of factuality sounds rather crude, yet it is true that there was a time when deconstruction and hermeneutics (even the weak hermeneutics introduced by Vattimo and Rovatti) were progressive projects, meant to warn the uninformed that what the powers-that-be wished to pass on as true facts were nothing more than interpretations and ideologies (ideology is an interpretation treated as an undisputed fact, and that makes you act accordingly). In the last ten years, however, we have witnessed a sea-change: the anti-progressive forces have enthusiastically adopted the relativist paradigm, so much so that people, at least from what I see in Italy and the U.S., are living in separate realities according to the centrifugal force that twirls them in a circle. There are no facts, there is only spin. The great anti-Nietzschean line that Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan threw to a political opponent during a 1994 public debate (“You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts”) no longer applies. In the world of today’s talking heads the rule is, “my opinions are all the facts I need.” To be sure, the right wing faction is not the only one to blame, but an hour spent watching the RAI 1 newscast in Italy or Fox News in the U.S. is more than enough to make the most radical hermeneutician blush. It is no wonder, then, that an anti-hermeneutics movement is on the rise among young continental philosophers. If speculative realism (as it is called in France) or new realism have any hope to bring back some common sense into the life of our societies (and the emphasis is as much on “common” as it is on “sense”), I am willing to enter into a penitent mode and unfurl my hermeneutician’s flag. But I am not very optimistic, and most of all I do not want to give up Plato’s old hermeneutic advice to everyone who is chained inside a cave and sees shadows parading in front of him: do not just look in front of you; look around, look behind, look deep, because facts are not what they seem.

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