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PETER CARRAVETTA

After Thought: From Method to Discourse

Part I

Developing a model to interpret Italian critical thought

Italian critical thought can reveal surprising developments if seen from an outer frame, one which is at once supra-national and language-neutral, on the one hand, and on the other geopolitically situated. Concerning the first frame, I want to inquire about a genuine philosophical problem, one which has engaged philosophers and thinkers of all stripes across national and linguistic borders, and that for centuries, namely, the problem of method in interpretation. Concerning the second frame, I want to identify in the concrete social reality of Italy how certain thinkers and currents dealt with the problem of interpretation *tout court*. In this sense, the protagonists are referred to as 'Italian critical thinkers.' The temporal frame is from World War Two to 2001, which I consider to coincide, *grasso modo*, with the Postmodern age.¹

The working thesis here is that throughout the Modern period philosophy and critique have been mainly concerned with the problem of Knowledge itself, having devised and developed several different and historically influential "epistemologies," that is to say, formal pathways of inquiry and legitimation of the strategies of learning (including the hypotheses, the actual processes, the pragmatic models). The episteme, in brief, can be located or identified through a Method. But in doing so, philosophy has had progressively to ignore or devalue its theoretical underpinnings, its ontological-existential dimensions and therefore its rhetorical constitution. We have all been culturally imprinted with the notion that rhetoric is always "mere" rhetoric. My work challenges that assumption, for, Alas! as Nietzsche

¹ See my theoretical-historiographic study, *Del Postmoderno* (2009).

observed, *Es gibt keine unrhetorische Sprache!* Understood as a linguistic act which must take place in a society and requiring one or more interlocutors, rhetoric is actually a discursive agent, a force that permits the individual to gain but also to impart understanding. And it is also necessarily concrete, material, political. But at the same time, the rhetorical act – which means basically *speaking to* someone else – also reveals a methodic structure, for viewed up close (or through Aristotle, Cicero, Vico, or Perelman, to name a few), discourse is built upon argument, and even conversations manifest an ordering and a sequencing whose function is precisely to bring us to “making the point,” reaching a conclusion, *and* getting consent or agreement.

Connected with this is the fate of Theory, which, as we will see further down, is also an act of rhetorical spectacle, or a setting, a general, circumscribing, horizon, revealing a conception of Being that ultimately legitimates the episteme uncovered through method. The theoretician is a spectator, and what makes sense – i.e. what will be considered knowledge – can be given only within what that critical gaze can see, or thinks it can see. However, theory also exists as a product of language use. There is therefore a rhetorical component at work when unfurling a theory, one which now, true to the etymon of *krinein*, chooses certain values over others, separates what can be seen from what remains in the dark, literally “judges” what is the case from what is not the case. Theory, as a shorthand for metaphysical conceptions of the world, or of being human, imposes a view, frames the object, the other, in its own singularity, and demands that it account for what it is. So theory turns out to be the articulation of an ontology. Owing to their common rhetorical basis, Being and Knowing are co-terminous: whether explicitly uttered or implicit in the working of discourse, stating what something is or ought to be entails admitting only certain methods, specific vocabularies and syntaxes, and not others.² By the same token, methods of analysis, or by our reading, certain rhetorical strategies, need an overarching (or underlying) theory to

² Choosing one phrase over another is a determining factor in Lyotard's *Le Différend* (1983). Let us recall that the post-War years were marked by the rise of the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” posited by Ricoeur and referring to three privileged interlocutors who contributed to it: Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. The upshot is that by the '80s any theory, whether semiotic or deconstructive, was marked by a sense of distrust, as if stating something meant necessarily lying about something else. See also the work of Harald Weinrich.

legitimate their moves, to guide the (re)search, to serve as a reassuring mirror. Thus the question to ask is: what predominates, theory or method? But now if method has an unthematized yet constitutive linguistic element, meaning a rhetorical structure (as both intend to “prove” or “demonstrate” a point), has anyone tried to blunt the claims of rationality and exact statements?

Finally, if everything impinges on the rhetorical – or what in other countries has been called Discourse, – there is need to bring back the Interpreter, an interpreting consciousness possibly responsible for its acts, linguistic or otherwise. This is a daunting task. For that, perhaps it is necessary to take a detour through a thinker much discussed in Italy, C.S. Peirce, and appropriated by distinct schools, mostly led by Umberto Eco and Carlo Sini.³ But the problem still resides with the Modern acceptance of a conception of language which was fundamentally scientific, rationalistic, and which legitimized a “system” in which there was no room for invention and interpersonal relations.

Hence my claim that, for example, certain formalisms, structuralisms, and textualisms had to be, by intrinsic necessity, short lived and ineffectual, without denying them the sense of rupture and renewal they introduced in the Italian panorama of the '60s and the '70s. Because when the basic conception of language of these school is that it is an arbitrary assemblage of signs designating things and thoughts by some statistical calculus of agreement and convention, then it is easy to continue talking about knowledge without interrogating reality, since it will all come down to a combinatorial semiotics: even reference became a sign. Culture is but signs and, in a French-inspired variation, text. Those who had struggled through the '60s to recalibrate or worse abandon idealism and Marxism found themselves with a stark choice: unlimited semiosis, or endless regress (i.e.: deconstruction). But deconstruction did not have the impact it had in the United States. In either case, it was the domain of the Signifier, as signified and reference were also considered signifiers.

³ See for instance by Eco *A Theory of Semiotics* (1975), which had been preceded by a number of earlier books, such as *La forma del contenuto*, *La struttura assente*, and *Segno*. By Sini, see his *Semiotica e filosofia* and his journal “Luomo, un segno.” Peirce had been introduced in Italy already in the first decade of the 20th century by Giovanni Vailati (1863-1909) and Mario Calderoni (1879-1914), but ultimately had to wait until after World War Two, with the launch of semiotics by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1921-1985), who also wrote books on Vailati and Charles Morris.

Arguments drawn to try to explain what is the meaning of existence, which flourished after the hecatomb of World War Two (See works by Abbagnano, Pareyson, even the younger Della Volpe and Bobbio), were sidelined by the '70s. Political discourse also split into various configurations, with Frankfurt School-inspired critics adapting to the obvious threat to Enlightenment-type possibilities posed by a growing bourgeois country. And of course there were strands that developed psychoanalysis and anthropology, but not sufficiently to give birth to an "Italian school" in these fields. Feminist thought, unlike its French counterpart, had a distinctive "political" tenor to its theorization, as opposed to a psychoanalytic one. But deep down the arguments were also basically about "how" to interpret certain phenomena. Social and political dynamics occurring through the '60s and the '70s did witness the growth of conflicting views, and there was much inter-university chatter and talk of "inauthenticity," "contradiction," the "*irrazionale*," and "totalization," but they also tugged at the strong grip rationalistic methods had on inquiry *tout court* (and of a partly latent concern with language itself). Thus if one thinks of the contributions to Italian critical thinking by the likes of Sapir, Whorf, Bachktin, Benveniste, Perelman, Grassi, and in their antithetical modes by (besides the mentioned Frankfurt School), Foucault, Lyotard, and Ricoeur, one gets the feeling that Italian thought is mainly a reworking of everything that had been done outside of Italy, with little or no attention to the great and still mostly underexplored tradition that extends from Cicero through the humanists, and the early moderns like Bruno and Vico.⁴

Looking at the Italian panorama from a distance, then, we find a centering, metaphysical tendency in the late-'40s and early-'50s, where several General Theories compete for supremacy (Croce [however belatedly, still a favorite], Banfi, Pareyson, Abbagnano, Severino, Colletti, Della Volpe). The emergence

⁴ One underappreciated thinker who, significantly if ironically, made his career outside of Italy, is Ernesto Grassi (1902-1991). After his thesis on Plato with G. Gentile, Grassi emigrated to Germany and worked for over twenty years with M. Heidegger. To his credit, in the '60s and the '70s he re-read the Latin and Italian Humanist tradition *through* Heidegger, showing that the thinker of the black forest had completely missed the opportunity to validate a thought of language, or a search for being through discourse theory, by considering it – in his 1947 *Letter on Humanism* – rhetorical and anthropocentric. See for example his *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism* (1983). However, his work falls outside the theory-method approach I am adopting in this brief sketch.

of a diffracting, ideologically-informed flurry of regional, sectorial or “praxic” concerns in the mid- to late-’50s culminate in the “methodological explosion” of the early ’60s. Here we will encounter the schools of criticism that adopt (and at times re-adapt) and develop “scientifically” the work of Marx, Freud, Jakobson, Jung, Morris, Levi-Strauss, and Lacan. This situation entailed abandoning reflection on the underlying and legitimizing *Grund* (or, conversely, the overarching *theos*, of theory), in a sense disclosing its emptiness: idealism, historicism, transcendentalism, spiritualism begin to wane from the cultural panorama, or at best remain confined to a few university departments.

By the mid- to late-’70s, the methodological thrust in humanistic inquiry either fades or becomes reflex action, and reason and interpretation themselves are at the center of reflection. There is ample proof of this in writings by literary and art critics, philosophers, social scientists, and poets. The publication of Aldo Gargani’s anthology *Crisi della ragione* in 1979, which contained “position papers” by the most distinguished thinkers at the time, clearly demonstrates that reason, and its methodological certainties, are no longer trustworthy.⁵ This sets the premises for breaking the dominant methodology-driven paradigm, which had gained favor for nearly two decades. Thinkers show that the claims of reason and the procedures of various disciplines (anthropology, linguistics, epistemology, political science) are metaphysically and rhetorically flawed, and must be questioned anew.

A few years later, the theoretical-ontological side also began to reconsider First Principles and the much-bashed though still enduring “great values of (Western) civilization.” Italian critics offered a number of answers which compare favorably with the variety offered on the French, American, and English scenarios. But a “thought of difference” which was rather different from that of its Euroamerican counterparts emerged. The resulting post-metaphysical, “nihilistic,” critique led to the idea of a “weak ontology,” launched by Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti (*Weak Thought*, 1983),⁶ whose effects and relevance have been in part explored, but there are still strands that could be developed further. Weak thought challenged not only

⁵ See my article “From *Crisis of Reason* to *Weak Thought*,” in *DIFFERENTIA review of Italian thought* (1988).

⁶ See English version, *Weak Thought* (2012).

the previous generations of scientific-minded critics, but also the theorists of being (the ever-present subterranean idealist strand), of history (the tradition of dialects and Marxism) and of deconstruction. The one great original aspect which Vattimo proposed to break through the “end of metaphysics” and the “end of philosophy,” – and at that time other forms of critique which called for an “end of ideology,” “end of history,” and so forth, – is that perhaps we don’t have to turn the page entirely, simply because... we can’t! Many had come to similar conclusions, from Derrida and Foucault to Rorty and Gadamer. Vattimo’s approach in the ’80s was to incorporate the dispositive of critique for both, the thought of difference (both the French and German versions of it), and that of dialectics (both Hegelian and Marxist), by pruning them of their tendency to the absolute, to totality. In this fashion, “weakened” and humbled, they could still be read as inroads into new plausible interpretive scenarios of our cultural (un)conscious, looking at the remains of being, so to speak, and attempt alternative formulations. And this bodes well, as it is *ab origine* interdisciplinary and constitutively transnational (The fact that in the ’90s and later Vattimo himself made a “turn” toward theology need only interest us up to a point.)⁷

Finally, in the same spirit of an increasingly transdisciplinary research and writing independently of (or purposely ignoring) ideological and institutional boundaries, philosophers from very different backgrounds are suggesting today novel ways of reading and writing (about) texts, with the result that the interpretive essays no longer shun the techniques and range of fiction, freeing up a prose which willingly blurs the distinction between story and history, science and myth, politics and aesthetics. The analysis of this “threshold” criticism, object of a forthcoming study, will focus on the writings of thinkers (no longer “philosophers”) such as Giorgio Agamben, Alessandro Dal Lago, or Remo Bodei, others who are no longer with us but were perhaps ahead of the curve, such as Aldo Gargani, Giorgio Colli, and Ferruccio Masini, and some of the younger critics who, straddling the millennium, wrote about the postmodern and its unreassuring aftermath.

As to how much of Italian critical thought has entered American critical thought, that remains to be determined. We need studies that start with

⁷ See my critique “Against Interpretation?” in Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder, eds., *Contemporary Italian Philosophy* (2009).

the philological presence in journals, and so on. Certainly authors such as Eco, Vattimo, Perniola, Marramao, Cavarero, and Agamben are, and have been for the past twenty years, discussed in American philosophical circles (at least in what used to be called “Continental Philosophy”), and some like Agamben are also regulars in the amorphous Cultural Studies circuit. But the question that to me seems very timely, in 2014, is the following: how far can we take the notion of an “Italian” critical thought, when the evidence makes it clear that during the past sixty years Italians have been in constant dialogue with their peers in Germany, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and in some little-explored nooks with Asian thought and Latino thought. Maybe the only marker is that they wrote in the Italian language. And this is not enough: the language is crucial when it comes to poetry, but in philosophy, it may just as well be an accident in substance, pure historical chance. It begs the question of what is the idea of a “national” philosophy, which was paramount until World War II – one need only think of the influence, for nearly twenty years, of Giovanni Gentile, and his being almost automatically jettisoned after 1945, as if he didn’t have anything else to say besides his adherence to National Socialism, that is, Fascism. Italian critical thought “imported” so much in the past sixty years, as to nearly invalidate the idea of an “Italian thought.” If one follows closely the developments from the ’50s to the ’90s, one can hazard the idea that, indeed, philosophy written in Italian demonstrates that thinking is finally free of such national-language anchors⁸ and can dwell on truly contemporary issues, such as ecology, migration, capitalism, slavery (yes, under different names, but human trafficking nonetheless), and the daunting challenge of a general ethic for a world caught in the Orwellian warp, in what can be characterized as “The Age of Constant Distortion.”⁹ Beyond the difference and co-enabling

⁸ For a recent account of what passes for contemporary Italian thought, see the recent issue of *Annali d’Italianistica*, dedicated to “Italian Critical Thought,” edited by Alessandro Carrera.

⁹ I developed this notion of the residue of the postmodern age as an “Orwellian warp,” or what can also be called a systematic, structural distortion of anything that enters the cybersphere, a manipulable discourse where “reality” and the “truth” mean what whoever has the largest audience says they mean. Cf. *Del postmoderno*, 411-34, now retrievable on Academia.com.

status of the method-theory relation, we are actually confronted with the fact that discourse, rhetoric, is the only reality we have. For better or for worse.

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