Forum

American Studies and Italian Theory

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Introduction

1. Field or Movement?

No one thinks or writes alone. The process has to do with phantoms more than we would be willing to admit. One writes *with* and thinks *with*, but often the term at the other end of the collaboration remains in the shadows. The task of tracing influences is, of course, an essential part of literary scholarship, but, as Harold Bloom taught us, human creativity is regulated by conflict: it is an ongoing clamor of kenosis and askesis, of defense mechanisms and self-censorship, that often leaves the salient dialogue undecoded, part and parcel of that unsettling incompleteness which defines any making, with language or with concepts. The incompleteness has been thrust further in the foreground since structuralism, with individual disciplinary boundaries becoming increasingly permeable, and until today the flow and circulation of ideas seems the most desirable modality within the Humanities. Given the migratory vocation of anything contemporary, it is hard to say who influences whom or what influences what. Such a porous state of things also makes questionable the use of adjectives of nationality, like Italian, for example, in the phrase "Italian Theory." However, as you will glean from Roberto Esposito's contribution to this forum, "Italian," in relation to theory, seems to function much like Benveniste's first-person pronoun does in relation to language: it's a kind of subjectivity; it's a distinctive assumption of theory. In other words, to speak of Italian Theory means less to speak of Italy and more to suggest another historical phase of critical thought.

After all, "American," in American Studies, is an adjective of nationality, too. As such, it has sparked the liveliest debates and led to different turns in the field. The great revival of the 1980s was followed by a critical poetics of fragmentation, which led American Studies to be dissociated from the notion of a "single unitary culture" to be conceived, instead, as

an interdisciplinary formation and a movement made of a multiplicity of movements and of sedimented, if still unretrieved, past histories (Pease and Wiegman 23). Throughout the 1990s and until the early 2000s, the increasing decentering and relocation of "America" outside its own national boundaries produced what has come to be known as the transnational turn. The turn captures the attempt to reconceptualize America as an object of study from "the outside in" and to problematize categories like "American Literature" (Giles). These turns have resulted into a broadening of the field, kindling an interesting debate on whether American Studies is actually a field or a movement. The present post-transnational phase seems marked by a turn toward the "imaginary." As scholars wonder about the human imagination and its boundaries (Bieger, Saldivar, Voelz), Jan Radway's challenge, in her important piece "What's in a Name," "to account for how the unintelligible and unrepresentable can be brought to bear on the field" (Pease and Wiegman 24), appears more relevant than ever.

American Studies seems on the verge of yet another metamorphosis that might shape the field into a hospitable space of passage and transit for new critical thought. A certain intimacy with Italian thought seems central in the endeavor. Donald Pease makes the eloquent case for the transformative effect that this intimacy has already had in American Studies. In fact, his contribution to our forum offers the opportunity to recap the critical environment that might make a discussion of the conjunction of American Studies and (something that has come to be called) "Italian Theory" particularly desirable, even, perhaps, fruitful.

The question of a conversation between the two arises under the auspices of critical thought, by which I mean a blend of interdisciplinary critical reflection and writing (also called in short-hand "theory") that has transformed literary criticism and the study of literature. The study of American literature has been particularly hospitable to theory.

Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, with the onset of post-ideology and post-feminism, the study of American literature has been driven by remarkable theoretical work on the notion of identity. At first, the desirable paradigm of a multiplication of identities did not seem incompatible with the philosophical notion of the subject. All that seemed to be required was a labor of excavation within the concept, so that thought might grasp

identities which, in fact, it had melancholically encrypted. The resources of psychoanalysis combined with the work of Michel Foucault and his notion of productive power to mount a critique of the coercive aspect of the construction of public identity and to unmask the functionality of identity discourse to power. What had appeared a liberating multiplication and assertion of differences was now found to be the regulatory consequence of the construction of public identity, including those collective identities which were thought to serve emancipatory purposes. The solution of the long wave of excavation and critique has been to resist a structure of exclusion, whose archetype remained Kafka's man before the law, and, preferably, from the early 1990s to the early 2000s, resist with the body. An incongruity began to emerge. While, one the one hand, critical thought has promoted first the visibility of identities and later the fact of their equal worth, on the other hand, social and political reality has increasingly concentrated on borders to guard, frontiers to protect, barriers to assert, with the result of a disconnect between thought and history. The law oscillates between multiple identities to host and bodies to count. Alain Badiou wonders at this paradox: "In the hour of generalized circulation and the phantasm of instantaneous cultural communication, laws and regulations forbidding the circulation of persons are being multiplied everywhere" and, to address it, he resorts to the figure of St. Paul and his transgressive relation to the law (Badiou 10). What I can offer here is only an incomplete picture, with omissions and blindspots. Nevertheless, it may be said that it is precisely in the shadow of this paradox that Italian Theory takes on a certain authoritativeness, with its emphasis on life, with its alternative view of modernity as a defensive mechanism for the negation of life, with its preference for the semantic metamorphosis of the most widely used philosophical terms – subject, person, community –, with its disposition to venture in the region of the non-person, all of which allows for, rather than excludes, a timely and explosive assertion of human creativity and potential.

It is refreshing to read Donald Pease's account because it spells out the role that Italian thought has already played in the reorientation of American Studies. As a thinker in the forefront of this reorientation, Pease names, in particular, Antonio Gramsci and Giorgio Agamben, whose work, he remarks, offered "the theoretical apparatus I needed to formulate the New Americanists project." As Pease writes, the New Americanists project questions the "pre-

linguistic identification of the field practitioner with the field's assumptions, principles, and beliefs." Italian thought has created the need for a type of knowledge production beyond the modality of identification. It has helped to place at the center of American Studies questions about the kind of scholarship we wish to encourage, the kind of knowledge we wish to produce, as well the problem of interpretation, and thus it may have assisted American Studies in its movement of de-territorialization (the relocation of "America") in ways that deserve further investigation.

Peter Carravetta casts his gaze on Italian thought from an American distance. In the first part he takes us on a journey through Italian Thought from the post-World War II period to the present, with particular focus on its internationalization. As traditional philosophy, with its preoccupation with methodological certainties, cedes to critical thought, with its emphasis on a rhetorical view of being and meaning, Italian thought opens to an interdisciplinary and transnational scenario. Carravetta – critic, poet, philosopher, who, among other things, has translated Gianni Vattimo and Aldo Rovatti's fortunate volume *Il Pensiero Debole* for the English-speaking public (*Weak Thought* 2012) – points to Vattimo's "weak ontology" as a significant phase in the progress of Italian thought outside, both outside local disciplinary boundaries and outside national boundaries.

Carravetta does ask the question of "how much of Italian critical thought has entered American critical thought," though not specifically "American Studies," and leaves the question open to debate. But it is interesting that Carravetta, himself a representative of American critical thought, attempts a reply by taking a detour through philosopher Charles S. Peirce, once very popular among Italian thinkers. Peirce's view that "*the very process of cognition is intrinsically related to the continuum of social forces and interactions*" seems attractive because it recovers the notion of community as a basis for that mode of knowing Carravetta terms "rhetorical hermeneutics." Like Esposito, Carravetta questions and rejects the notion of a "national" thought; unlike Esposito, he views community neither as a melancholy nor as an impossible term, containing within itself the immunity against individual dispossession.[1] This divergence with current Italian Theory

[1] See Roberto Esposito, "Melanconia e Comunità," and *Communitas: Origine e Destino della*

promises a dialogue, which hopefully will continue beyond the occasion of this forum.

Roberto Esposito's contribution, "German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought," appears here in English for the first time. It will be noted that, like Pease and Carravetta, Esposito prefers the term "Italian Thought" to the label Italian Theory. In the rest of this Introduction, I take my cue from the narrative of Italian Theory which emerges in Roberto Esposito's work first to consider the reliance of that narrative on American literary references and secondly to connect the debate on Italian Theory to the search, by some of the foremost American theorists, to reinvent the critical act.

2. Figures/Phantoms

If the transnational world consists of diasporic communities and dispersed forces (Appadurai), this is the world that Roberto Esposito's narrative of Italian Theory is keyed into. As you'll read, Italian Theory names a phase of theory, that is to say, of European philosophy's movement outside its own boundaries, in its migratory flow and geographical displacement first with the great critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, later with French theory, and in the present, argues Esposito, with the phenomenon of Italian thinkers who have come to wield significant influence in the U.S. and abroad even before they could make a name for themselves at home. Esposito's contribution to this forum, "German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought," to a certain extent continues and specifies his own representation of Italian Theory in his book *Pensiero Vivente*. There, his narrative of Italian Theory begins with a blank, with a time of stasis and non-action. Italian theory rises under the sign of sleep and slumber. More than originating somewhere, it manifests as a reawakening of Italian Thought (the formulation preferred by Esposito), of a philosophical-critical body that had always been there. Beginning with a blank at the beginning,

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Comunità.

Italian Theory never really begins. It lies dormant. When it awakens, we find it already mixed with other waves of thought, according to a logic of contamination that often subtends the formation of ideas, especially when these seem "new" in certain conceptual horizons but, in fact, come from strands of thought, already at work elsewhere, which can take on thematic stability and the necessary conceptual force only in the new register beyond the original conceptual horizon.

Esposito's narrative gives us access to the notion of a latent body of thought hosted in the folds of critical thought (theory) which can only fully emerge in the present. Interestingly, the emergence of this latent thought, particularly attuned to the "dynamics of globalization and immaterial production of the postmodern" (*Pensiero Vivente*), seems inseparable from American atmospheres. Esposito does not explicitly refer to American literature but his narrative recalls a Rip Van Winkle modality of slumber and re-awakening. In its re-awakening, Italian Thought exhibits three distinctive features, all of them symptomatic of a desire to overcome the generalized sense of an empasse: 1) it assumes that the act of thinking is unsheltered; 2) it engages the notion of conflict; 3) without forgetting Foucault, it has the capacity to bypass power with the alternative meaning of power as potential or potentiality.

In the case of Giorgio Agamben, the reference to an American text is explicit. Herman Melville's Bartleby, "the scribe who dips his pen in thought" (Agamben 49), first marks the transition to a post-philosophic view of thought as grammatology, that is to say, as writing and material making; secondly, Melville's creature becomes the figure of Agamben's most popular concept: potentiality. In direct kinship to Derrida's scribe, the paradigmatic reader who rebelliously cuts off meaning from its hermeneutic depth (Derrida "Signature" 92; 108), Bartleby soon rejoins a line of modernist heralds (aggeloi), like Kafka's Barnabas, who are the bearers of a message whose content they do not know (Agamben 69). He is the ultimate messenger of language and, as such, of the message purified of any subjective element (Agamben 68). His strange, bold refusal – "I'd prefer not to" – thrusts in our view the white page, and the white page returns us to the question of the power of thought: the passage of thought to action (Agamben 51). Appealing to "the potentiality not to," the secret

pivot of Aristotelian doctrine, which makes of any power also a non-power, or impower, Agamben emphasizes Bartleby's state of suspension between negation and affirmation. Far from being a state of indifference, the scribe's position conveys all the tension inhering the experience of a possibility or a potentiality (69). His fidelity to the white page and to its blank writing insists not so much on content as on the slant of light cast by potentiality (*lo spiraglio luminoso del possible*/Agamben 69).

Bartleby is ahead of us. Positioned between the poles of being and nothing, he becomes emancipated from both. If he acts out the drama of a (European?) philosophical thought forced to think with the phantom friend of nihilism (Agamben 72), he chooses neither conceptual plenitude nor nihilistic nakedness, sticking instead to the precarious, fragile position of the experimentalist who stakes his life on the "impotent potentiality" that exceeds both being and nothing (Agamben 72). In Agamben's reading, Bartleby belongs in the company of those who experiment with desubjectification. As such, he embodies a long tradition of Italian thought (including Dante) aimed at moving beyond the subject, in the region of the "whatever" or, as Esposito would say, of the third person.

Importantly, Bartleby is against the regime of the copy. He enacts that renunciation, even against the eternal return, because the "infinite repetition of what has been completely evades the power not to be" (Agamben 84), seeking instead to restitute power to the difference between the world of actualized contingency and that of possibility (84). In Agamben's hands, Bartleby's experimentalism – inflected by the thought of Walter Benjamin, especially by the redemptive potential of memory to restitute what has been to its power not to be – blends with the modernist and late modernist motif of the production of the new.

Agamben's Bartleby becomes a good example of the latency of Italian Thought that one encounters in Esposito's account. His style of interrupted repetition reawakens belatedly the significance of earlier manifestations of Italian Theory. Commonly, Italian Theory is traced to the workers' struggles (operaismo) of the early 1960s (Gentili), but another important strain in the same years is the question of the production of the new (how not to repeat what has gone before). Given the flat plane of the infinite number of texts that make up human culture, the problem is how new meaning can

issue diasporically from the contact of those texts *and* in the proximity and contiguity of critical and creative gestures. From this vantage point, Carla Lonzi rises perhaps as the most legendary Bartleby: the public intellectual who "would rather not to," suspended between potentiality and act, between yes and no. Just like Bartleby's, Lonzi's thought appears as an experiment in truth. An art critic by formation, she gave up criticism because she felt that it had been impermeable to the modernist avant-gardes. Polarizing the critical and artistic gesture, criticism lacked authenticity when it did not become obsolete. [2] Her "rather not" led to the birth of feminist theory in Italy.

3. Modernity

The conceptual force accrued by Italian Thought outside its national boundaries may depend on its revisionary attitude toward modernity. Without dismissing the primacy of language, by now an inalienable legacy of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, Italian Theory nevertheless invites a reassessment of modernity, one that extends to the latter's aesthetic and critical production. It is not a matter of reawakening to the world as if deconstruction had never happened; yet, Italian Theory does carry us toward a future beyond deconstruction, especially because of its absorption in the concept of life, which is understood, much like Deleuze, "as the spark of impersonal, virtual, pre-individual life in which an impersonal singularity experiences its affirmative power" (Bazzicalupo 117).

Like political philosophers, Esposito starts with the assumption that life is governed. The natural state of mutual destruction and appropriation of life and goods, which made necessary Hobbes's sovereign power, always hovers in the background. But the assumption does not lead Esposito in a psychoanalytic direction, toward the dissolution of the social tie into an "ethical beyond" (Borch-Jacobsen).[3] Rather, he devotes his attention

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[2] See Carla Lonzi's landmark text in art criticism, *Autoritratto*.

[3] The phrase is from Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen. See especially the chapter entitled "The Freudian Subject: From Politics to Ethics" in *The Emotional Tie: Pscychoanalysis, Mimesis, and Affect* (15-35). The transformation of the social tie into its ethical future is one of the

to the negation of life as the dominant motif of modernity. For Esposito, modernity is about preserving life through power; it is a conceptual apparatus, a set of artificial procedures aimed at preserving life while negating its vital power (Bazzicalupo 114-15). This focus enables him to investigate the entangled notions of community and immunity, and thus articulate the meaning of community in relation to its opposing pole. Immunity is defined as a mechanism of "repressive self-preservation" to which every individual, consciously and strategically, resorts to defend life against the threat issuing from community (Bazzicalupo 115).

If modernity is a conceptual apparatus, one wonders about the dealings of modernity-related aesthetic and critical production with that apparatus. The modernist revolution and the affirmation of vital power, which inheres to the avant-gardes, must reckon with their own dealings with modernity's mechanism of immunity against the burden of the reciprocal gift that is assumed in the notion of community. Not only is Italian Theory interested in the production of the new (*fuoriuscita del nuovo*/ Bazzicalupo 112), it also shows a special interest for the notions of creativity and potentiality understood as an unstoppable life instinct. This interest raises the

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most fascinating problems of the 1990s, when Italian Theory was still in a state of latency. Attention to justice was related to it. In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida evokes the ethical tie quoting Levinas: "The relation to others – that is to say, justice" (23). Derrida's own words aptly render Marx's dream of an ethical or just distribution of humanity among all: "Not for calculable equality, therefore, not for the symmetrizing and synchronic accountability or imputability of subjects or objects, not for a *rendering justice* that would be limited to sanctioning, to restituting, and to *doing right*, but for justice as incalculability of the gift and singularity of the un-economic ex-position to others" (*Specters of Marx* 23). Besides Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's work, see also Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's useful article "La Panique Politique" (*Retreating the Political* 1-31), which traces the debate on ethical subjectivity in the "problematisation of the 'relation' between psychoanalysis and politics." Jean-Luc Nancy discusses ethical subjectivity when he talks of "articulated singularities among themselves": "This is 'sociality' as a sharing, and not as a fusion, as an exposure, or as an immanence" (*The Inoperative Community* 75). In the talk "Dell'Amicizia: Aristotele e Schmitt," delivered at the Istituto per gli Studi Filosofici in Naples, Giorgio Agamben usefully distinguished ethical subjectivity from ideologies of alterity. Critiquing the latter, yet echoing Derrida's "un-economic ex-position to others," he proposed that the ethical tie "wants the intimacy of the other."

question of a subtle connection (return?) to Anglophone modernism – or of Anglophone modernism's displacement in Italian Theory – and, at the same time, it can have a destabilizing effect on all those who approach it because it feels like an experience of loss, in which the loss in question is that of critical thought as one knows it.

Nevertheless, it is precisely in this destabilizing effect that Italian Theory emerges from its state of latent thought, overcomes belatedness, and begins to appear as a body of philosophical-critical thought with an affinity for our time. It resonates not only, as Esposito shows, with the dynamics of globalization and immaterial production of the postmodern phase, but also with the "crisis" of theory that has attended those dynamics. The loss of certainties about the critical act is currently at the center of the debate within American Studies. One thinks, for instance, about the recent work of Wai Chee Dimock. Under the name of "weak theory", Dimock stages a critic without certainties who longs for the interruption of the practice of a hermeneutic "sovereign knowingness" (744). Similarly, Lauren Berlant, in her work on precarity, interrogates a certain strong performance of the contemporary theorist and proposes critical practices of self-suspension and self-abeyance (27). She affirms our need "to invent new genres for the kind of speculative work we call 'theory'" (21). When seen, as Esposito does, as a more stable name for a line of thought that has traditionally emphasized the ambiguous and conflicting stance of the public intellectual *vis-a-vis* power, Italian Theory appears to be particularly receptive to the current American concerns about the relevance of criticism after theory. It recognizes the sense of an implosion and, lending renewed significance to the question of the critic as public intellectual, helps address the urgency, within critical thought itself, for a realignment of discourse and the reality around us, for new edge and new possibilities. The broadening significance of Italian Theory, therefore, reflects a renewed interest in a thought whose propulsive outside, as Esposito explains in his contribution to this forum, is neither the social dimension of critical theory nor the textual dimension of French theory, but "the constitutively conflicting space of political practice."

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ROBERTO ESPOSITO

German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought[1]

The role of displacement in the renewal of European philosophy cannot be stressed enough. After its manifest decline in the 1930s and 1940s, European philosophy migrated outside its traditional disciplinary boundaries, in a movement of displacement that continues to this day. The first geographical displacement coincided with the forced exile of some of the greatest European thinkers to the United States, and it soon translated into a conceptual displacement. In the post-WWII period, European philosophy turned its back to the concept of "crisis," which had constituted its principal paradigm in the pre-War decades. Its most illustrious examples remained the writings of Valery on the crisis of the spirit, of Husserl on the crisis of the European sciences, and of Heidegger on the crisis of the metaphysical tradition. A vast intellectual community of writers and thinkers as different as Thomas Mann and Ortega, Spengler and Benedetto Croce, had espoused the notion of crisis. Despite their differences, these thinkers were all concerned about the deadly grip in which European thought found itself, and believed that the latter should recover the proper Greek origins from which it had fatefully strayed. Their writings of the

[1] Roberto Esposito's essay "German Philosophy, French Theory, Italian Thought" was first published in Italian as the introduction to the volume *Differenze Italiane*, edited by Dario Gentili and Elettra Stimilli (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2015). It appears here in my translation and in a somewhat abridged form. I wish to thank the author for contributing this piece to our forum. I also thank Andrew Cutrofello (Department of Philosophy, Loyola University Chicago) for his generosity in reading a draft of my translation and helping with revisions. (Mena Mitrano)

pre-WWII years, almost unfailingly and with only a few variations, link in circular fashion origin and end, *arche* and *telos*, and argue that only if it rediscovered its primeval bond to ancient Greece could European thought reclaim its hegemony over other cultures and thus fulfill the civilizing task to which it had always been destined. The key terms might change from thinker to thinker – "spirit," "being," "transcendental ego" – but, until the early 1940s, the great European philosophical tradition relied on one and the same *dispositif* of crisis.

The outcome of WWII marked the failure of the discourse of crisis. Worn out by its own search for an origin that it could not find, European thought moved outside its boundaries in the attempt to reinvent itself along other trajectories. At the onset of Nazism, the emigration to America of many German-Jewish intellectuals constituted the first dramatic enactment of this outward movement. Having left behind the regressive *dispositif* of crisis, European philosophy seemed revived and could assert once again its leadership worldwide. Although the early Frankfurt School thinkers are usually grouped under the label "critical theory," it should be noted that they, especially Adorno and Marcuse, kept to a strictly philosophical lexicon. According to the project of the Institute, philosophy should combine with other disciplines – sociology, psychoanalysis, aesthetics – without imitating their procedures, but rather by infusing their languages with the theoretical dimension which was necessary to question their assumed autonomy and bind the disparate fields of inquiry into a relation of contradiction. For this reason, one might refer to the first great displacement of European thought outside its boundaries with the term "German Philosophy," without it bearing any sort of national connotation, especially because it refers primarily to Jewish intellectuals. If one considers the great influence of Marcuse, above all, but also, to a lesser degree owing to their dealings with the student movement, of Adorno and Horkheimer, on the cultural politics of the time, it is safe to say that the passage to America gave new life to European philosophy. The novelty of this event cannot be underestimated. Perhaps for the first time in modern history, the broadening of a particular philosophy was proportional to its deterritorialization. Philosophy's disconnect from its original geography did not lead to its disempowerment, as Heidegger and the philosophers of

the crisis had predicted; far from it, it caused a formidable expansion. As Deleuze and Guattari would later argue in their discourse of "geophilosophy," the broadening is not a contingent but a structural trait of philosophical discourse: only if thought exceeds itself, and departs from its (assumed) matrix, can it find the resources for a profound renewal.

The 1970s, with the rise of French Theory, marked the second great displacement.

A group of French intellectuals, already quite well-known in their home country and, more generally, in Europe, because of their celebrity, were invited to lecture at American universities. Unlike the German diaspora, French Theory did not ensue from traumatic events and it was, therefore, devoid of any tragic resonance; but like the German diaspora, geographical displacement resulted in a contamination and in a circulation of ideas that took on the traits of a veritable hegemony in a number of disciplines, from literary criticism to gender studies and postcolonial studies. It is usually remarked that, once it crossed the Atlantic, the philosophy of Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, and Baudrillard became quite other as decontextualized fragments of their thought amalgamated in a new discourse called "theory." Undoubtedly, the phenomenon of hybridization that goes by the name of theory arose in response to a deeply felt need for renewal in the American university. At the same time, however, theory resulted in an extraordinary revival of French philosophy in the rest of the world: what happened in New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles resonated not only throughout the U.S. but also outside its boundaries, in Tokyo, Toronto, Buenos Aires, and Sidney. Once again, the movement outside created the conditions for an unexpected broadening of European philosophical reflection. Once again, European philosophy could reclaim a primacy that seemed to have waned. An elite of European philosophers attained the unprecedented status of celebrities, exerting their influence over a vast geographical territory through the deterritorrialization or displacement of their thought vis-à-vis their places of origin.

Is it possible, after German Philosophy and French Theory, to speak of an Italian Thought? The answer could only be extremely tentative. In this case, it would be a matter neither of hegemony nor of displacement; rather, the phrase Italian Thought points to a group of Italian philosophers

who have been successful in the U.S. (and from there have extended their influence to other countries) before they could make a name for themselves at home. If an Italian theory exists, the process it suggests seems far less clear than the critical waves that have preceded it, largely because the research of those Italian philosophers who are most successful abroad develops along less traditional paths. Yet, it is undeniable that an "Italian difference" has been latent for some time and that it is now emerging, as witnessed by the growing number of conferences, books, and essays devoted to it.

Let me call attention to its name, Italian Thought, in which the word "thought" replaces "philosophy" in the phrase "German philosophy" and "theory," in the phrase "French theory." In my book *Pensiero vivente* (2010), I give the word a meaning that is performative in more than one way. It is performative in terms of the relation of theory to practice, which has always been lodged at the heart of Italian thought, to the extent that it can be grasped simultaneously as a thought of practice and a practice of thought. It is performative also in the sense of a thought that is constituted in the making, and does not issue from theoretical positions but is one with its own practice.

There seems to be an improvised quality to Italian Thought. The Frankfurt School was engendered by the program of an Institute, French Theory by complex structuralist theories. Italian Thought arose from the political dynamics of the early '60s, which only later, if at all, flowed into the larger international student movement. Praxis preceded theory, interacting with it according to a modality of the outside attuned less to geographical displacement or the implementation of new disciplines and more to a concern for the political. The "outside" that propels Italian Thought is neither the social dimension of German Philosophy nor the textual dimension of French Theory, but the constitutively conflicting space of political practice.

Since the dawn of Italian modernity, proximity to the political has been the distinctive trait of Italian thought, connecting it to the history of the public intellectual. From early on, the lack of mediation by a centralized State has caused public intellectuals to be close to local political and ecclesiastical power, therefore in an ambivalent, and often conflicting, position toward power. Without taking this historical fact into account,

it would be difficult to understand the political fate of authors who were exiled, like Dante (1265-1321) and Machiavelli (1469-1527); condemned to death at the stake, like Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) and Giulio Cesare Vanini (1585-1619); forced to forsake their principles and imprisoned, like Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639); or abandoned to their own death on the opposite sides of the same line, like Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) and Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944). If, given certain conditions, power generates resistance, this is particularly true for philosophy. Italian philosophy is more a philosophy of resistance than a philosophy of power. It is no coincidence that Gramsci is studied internationally or that the workers' struggles of the 1960s, in a variety of strains, constitute the germinal core of Italian Thought.

Another core feature of Italian thought is its inclination to hybridize with other paradigms. The practice of externality as the form (and content) of thought is also a long-term feature. Italian thinkers have traditionally incorporated philosophical lexicons from other countries. The deterritorialization of German Philosophy was determined by necessity, that of French Theory by demand; the deterritorialization of Italian Thought comes with a native preference for hybridization which can be traced back to the Renaissance and has, in fact, flowed both ways, from Italy toward the outside and from the outside toward Italy, according to a modality that was typical of all of European culture between the 15th and 16th centuries.

Apart from its performative vocation and its preference for incorporation, a salient trait of Italian Thought is its central concept, especially the peculiar modality with which it is assumed. If sociocultural change was the central idea of the Frankfurt School and writing the central idea of French deconstruction, Italian Thought assumes the notion of life as its own semantic horizon. Here, one may think of Foucault and biopolitics, and, certainly, the fact that Foucault's pioneering research has attracted in Italy an interest that remains unequalled elsewhere in itself deserves further investigation. But the category of life happens to have been a traditional interest of Italian Thought, from Leonardo (1452-1519) to Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Giordano Bruno (1548-1600). For this reason, in Italy, there has never been the need for a specific philosophy of life of the kind that spread in Germany or France

in the early twentieth-century. It could be argued that Italian thought has always been a thought about life, one articulated in relation to the tension between politics and history. Italian thought has not been a philosophy of consciousness, like classical French thought, nor a metaphysics, like German thought, but neither has it been a philosophy of logic and language, like the Anglophone tradition. Less an analytics of interiority, of transcendence, of logical and linguistic structures, it has developed as a knowledge about life, about the body, about the world.

A comparison with German Philosophy and French Theory will reveal the characteristic inflection of Italian *Thought*. The typical modality of the Frankfurt School was negativity. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* was, at the same time, the avant-garde of German philosophy and its interpretation. Adorno responded to the theological *dispositif* of crisis by opposing Hegel's dialectic. He worked out a radically negative position that contrasted the master's willingness to entrap negativity and force it to a resolution. Instead, comparing negation only to itself, Adorno transformed it into the form *and* content of the concept, foreclosing any kind of resolution. In a different way, Horkheimer reached the same conclusion. For Horkheimer, the critical power of the negative is so strong that it turns against the same theory that activates it, negating any affirmative outcome. With the Frankfurt thinkers the struggle of the concept against itself became so inexorable that it led to self-contradiction. Adorno did not passively accept this consequence but theorized it as the sole option for philosophy after Auschwitz. Negativity is inseparable from the sense of a theoretical paralysis, one that is not possible to overcome.

As for French Theory, its core category was the Neutral. Blanchot famously used it for the first time while Derrida and Foucault revived it in different ways that nevertheless explicitly gestured toward a thought of the "outside." Deconstruction is neutral, suspended between yes and no, positioned at their point of intersection. It marks its distance both from the paradigm of crisis and that of critique. In Derrida's hands, the deconstruction of metaphysics does not negate the latter's mechanism of exclusion. Deconstruction rather suspends the mechanism of exclusion, applying it to itself in a self-dissolving movement. The reason for this is not that French Theory adheres to life (*esistente*); the distancing (and self-

distancing) aims for a certain self-ironic quality that, at a certain point, might inhibit any position, be it negative or affirmative.

If German Philosophy cathected negativity and French Theory neutralization, the prevailing mood of Italian Theory seems to be one of affirmation. Of course "affirmative thought" can mean many different things. Here, the phrase is meant to suggest a philosophy of immanence, which extends well beyond Italian philosophy and is associated with a tradition uniting Spinoza to Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze. Without underestimating the differences among these thinkers, it can be argued that, by and large, the main effort of Italian philosophers has been to think not in a reactive but in an active, productive, affirmative way. In Italian Thought, even biopolitics does not exclude an affirmative orientation. Certainly, one might question the outcome of such an affirmative thought, but the fact remains that it does point in a different direction. Let us ask, then, about this direction. What does Italian philosophy affirm? I wish to propose that it affirms the critique of political theology. Classical Italian thought – and by this I mean the line that unites Machiavelli, Bruno, Genovesi, Leopardi – is pervaded by the critique of political theology, and the strong interest in this category extends to the present. All the leading figures in Italian Thought – from Tronti to Cacciari and Agamben – have reflected, in different ways, on the relation between theology and politics. A similar reflection was also behind Marramao and Vattimo's theories of secularization, in the 1980s and 1990s, and Negri's opposition of the Machiavelli-Spinoza-Marx tradition to the Hobbes-Kant-Hegel axis in the 1970s. There seems to be an effort to release the political from both the semantics of negativity and the semantics of neutralization.

Obviously, to understand what I am saying, it is necessary to specify what is meant by political theology. The twentieth-century debate offers several, often contrasting, definitions: the religious legitimation of power, the political use of theology, the engendering of political categories from theological categories, or, inversely, the engendering of the religious from the political. As discussed in my book, *Due. La macchina della teologia*

politica e il post del pensiero (2013),[2] political theology is much more than a concept; it is a very old *dispositif* whose effects concern our time. Drawing on Heidegger and Foucault, I see political theology as a sort of machine which functions by separating our life from itself, both in the sense that it negates life and in the sense that it transcends life. This machine is a hybrid of Christian theology and Roman law, and, over the course of time, it has taken on different forms, but all linked to a mechanism of exclusionary inclusion (*inclusione escludente*).[3] The phrase "political theology" suggests the convergence, in one and the same category, of two contrasting elements engaged in a mutual exclusion or subjection. Once we start paying attention, we notice that all the universals of Western thought – including the idea of the West, often used to represent a whole – obsessively reproduce this antinomial structure. If this structure, in fact, never stops operating, it means that we are in the presence neither of an event nor of an ideology, but of the way in which the order of the Western world is conceived. By political theology, therefore, is to be understood a recurrent two-part structure, a Two that is sublated into One by excluding, or marginalizing, its other part.

I believe that the task of thought is to open up to its outside. It is not an easy task because it amounts to the quest for a conceptual language external to the theological-political horizon. Italian Thought has played, and can play, an important role in this task since, as we have seen, it is a thought of the outside, traditionally oriented toward the outside, antithetical to interiority, to transcendence, to separation. Without neglecting the individual differences among authors, it would seem that all the major categories of Italian thought confirm this orientation. In particular, I would like to comment briefly on three categories defined by their tension with what opposes them: "community," which stands opposed to "immunity;" "potentiality," to "power;" and "conflict," to "neutralization."

As for the first, the Italian debate on the notion of community dates

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[2] Roberto Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology and the Place of Thought*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (New York: Fordham UP, 2015).

[3] For further discussion of this mechanism, see *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011). First published as *Immunitas* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002).

back to the 1980s. At that time theoretical research inaugurated a radical deconstruction of the metaphysical basis of community as the term had been previously used, first by German sociology (Gemeinschaft) and later by various strains of the ethics of communication, and, finally, by American communitarianism. To be sure, Nancy and Blanchot had anticipated this radical deconstruction of community, but what lends the Italian reflection on community a specific political, or biopolitical, tone lacking in French deconstruction is its articulation in opposition to the notion of immunity. The term "immunity," also comes from the Latin and is the negative meaning of *munus*, originally indicating the law of a mutual gift. If *communitas* stands for a gift-giving commitment that binds its members to one another, immunitas is the *dispositif* which exempts the subject from the burden of the mutual gift. Thus, for example, in the juridical lexical field, immunity names the condition of those who are not subjected to the law, while in the medical or biological lexical fields an immune organism is a body capable of resisting external infectious agents.

The legal and the medical meanings overlap to grant us access to the biopolitical field, more so than the purely deconstructive notion of the "inoperative" or "unavowable." [4] When an ever-invasive immunizing *dispositif* becomes the syndrome of our time, the idea and practice of community is the political form of resistance against it. The problem has a twofold solution: rendering inoperative the immunizing apparatuses and activating new common spaces. From this perspective, the reflection on common goods, which in Italy started earlier than anywhere else, as well as on the common as a good for everyone, has shifted the discourse on community in an increasingly political direction. The modern trend to make the common into the public, on the one hand, and into the private, on the other, has reached its climax with globalization. This trend takes on special significance in the current biopolitical regime, in which every good, whether it be material or immaterial, is made to relate to the human body, including the natural resources of language and intelligence. It

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[4] Maurice Blanchot published La *Communauté inavouable* in 1983 (translated as *The Unavowable Community* in 1988), while Jean Luc Nancy published *La communauté désoeuvrée* in 1986 (translated as *The Inoperative Community* in 1991).

is precisely in response to this trend that the question of an affirmative biopolitics should be raised. The aim is to break the grip of the categories of the public and the private, which are crushing the common. In Italian Thought, the struggle against the privatization of water, of the earth, and of air is intertwined with the idea of a common intellect, in a tradition that begins with Averroes and continues with Marx and his notion of "general intellect." The critique of the legal category of personhood, a central category of the theological-political *dispositif*, in favor of a thought of the impersonal, is connected to the same tradition.

The second category of Italian Thought is "potentiality." It should be conceived as independent of – if not in contrast to – the notion of "act," on the one hand, and that of "power," on the other. Whether it is referred to thought or to a multiple form of subjectivity, potentiality belongs to the affirmative biopolitics mentioned earlier. Similarly to the pair community/immunity, potentiality takes on its meaning from two opposing poles. It is well known that in the Aristotelian tradition potentiality and act are dialectically linked in a relation of antithesis: what is in potential has not yet become act. Italian Thought contests precisely the necessity of this passage from potentiality to act in favor of a non-actualized potentiality, a potentiality that is not necessarily destined to be realized or not resolved in act.

The notion of potentiality, however, has two other antonyms: necessity, on the one hand, and power, on the other. Like possibility, potentiality constitutes the opposing pole of necessity. What is possible is what can be otherwise, or what can also not be and is, therefore, not necessary, as it is often thought in conjunction with a bitter philosophy of necessity. One need only consider how, in our own times, governmental politics invoke certain unbreakable, thus unquestionable, shibboleths as defensive arguments, a fact that Benjamin had already grasped when he spoke of "capitalism as religion." Understood in its creative, imaginative, and innovative meaning, the notion of the "possible" opposes this economic theology and contests its metaphysical assumptions. From the same vantage point, one encounters the other opposing pole of potentiality, that is to say, a narrow and excluding notion of power. Whether referred to a thought or to a multitude, potentiality applies a pressure from within on the power

of the living (*esistente*). When considered in relation to the expansion of life, potentiality, too, is a category of affirmative biopolitics. The contrast, theorized by Antonio Negri, between constituting and constitutive power belongs to the semantics of potentiality, as does also the notion of a creative constructive capacity that cannot be halted without its losing its vital energy. This energetic potentiality is not only keyed into the contemporary debate but also comes from the work of Machiavelli, which represents the origin of Italian political thought. When it is argued that Machiavelli, unlike Hobbes, is not a thinker of the "State," this means that he conceives the political in its becoming, as something that is never just a "state," and cannot be without becoming.

The last figure of Italian thought is perhaps the most political. I am referring to the notion of conflict. In order to undo power or, at the very least, face it, potentiality must presuppose the possibility of a conflict with those who have power. Machiavelli famously lodged this extraordinary novelty in the heart of political thought, consequently, of Italian thought more generally. The originality of his constitutive biopolitics, aimed at creating a constitutive power, lies precisely in the revolutionary idea that order, by definition, does not exclude conflict, but rather includes it. For Machiavelli, conflict, understood more in its political than in its military meaning, is essential to order; without conflict, political order will harden and die out. From his perspective, the real enemy of potentiality is not conflict, but neutralization. Without forcing a connection between views that are too far apart in time, it should nevertheless be noted that Italian *operaismo* of the 1960s returns to Machiavelli's thesis and translates it into practice. The fact that the workers' point of view differs from that of capital, much as the point of view of a woman, in feminist thought, differs from that of a man, turns conflict into the germinal moment of Italian Thought. This perspective also can be traced to that critique of political theology, which carries the wider significance of Italian thought. If the theological-political machine excludes, with the tendency of the Two to make itself into One, Italian philosophy reclaims the necessity of the Two within the horizon of politics. Above all, because of this claim, one can speak of an Italian difference.

Donald E. Pease

Gramsci/Agamben: Re-Configurations of American Literary Studies

Antonio Gramsci and Giorgio Agamben are the Italian thinkers who have figured importantly in my teaching and scholarship. Antonio Gramsci supplied the theoretical apparatus I needed to formulate the New Americanists project. And I could not have imagined the chief theoretical claims of *The New American Exceptionalism* without Giorgio Agamben's insights into the inter-relationship between the United States' biopolitical settlements and the state of exception.

Every generation needs an interpretive framework suited to that generation's assumptions and needs. The primary motive for the New Americanist project was generational: the way my generation of American literary studies scholars had been taught to select and teach works in American literature was out of alignment with the way we understood the United States in the light of the Vietnam War, and the social movements – the Civil Rights, the Woman's, Gay Liberation – set in opposition to it. I found Gramsci's theory of hegemony and his advocacy of the war of position in which aggrieved groups might aim at overthrowing the legitimacy of the dominant ideology especially important to the New Americanists project. Indeed Gramsci enabled me to imagine the field of American literature as itself the locus for the formation of oppositional coalitions capable of struggling at once through and against exploitation and hierarchy.

Gramsci defined "hegemony" as a negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus that the dominant historical bloc deployed to persuade subordinate groups to consent to their own domination without overt force. In keeping with a distinction that Gramsci had theorized, I described establishment Americanists as traditional intellectuals with proven expertise in legitimating and sustaining the regnant hegemony, and

I characterized New Americanists as organic intellectuals who inaugurated a war of position within the field of American Studies by giving voice to the repressed needs and aspirations of oppressed groups.

In my 1990 essay "New Americanists: Revisionary Interventions into the Canon," I described the New Americanists' efforts to reorganize the field of American literary studies as an instance of what Gramsci called a "war of position" in which counter-hegemonic forces were mobilized against the regnant hegemony. According to Gramsci, a war of position takes place during periods of organic crisis, when the collective will organized according to one interpretation of reality gives way to alternative interpretations. In keeping with Gramsci's analytic frame, I described the linkage that New Americanists had adduced between disciplinary initiatives within the field of American literary and social movements external to the field as symptoms of the irresolvable contradictions at work within the prevailing organizing principles of American Studies. I also represented those contradictions as the necessary and sufficient conditions for the transformation of the culture of American literary studies.

I specifically characterized the emergence of the New Americanists in terms of a generalized crisis in what I called the field-Imaginary (the pre-linguistic identification of the field practitioner with the field's assumptions, principles, and beliefs) of American Studies. When translating field-Imaginary materials into their interpretations, establishment Americanists enforced the field's tacit assumptions. As the secondary elaborations of their disparate critical practices, establishment Americanists rationalized their tacit assumptions into the common sense of the field, thereby disseminating signs and codes in terms of what counts as legitimate knowledge. In their readings of canonical works, establishment Americanists simply recirculated the field's assumptions, norms, and beliefs as beyond question.

The New Americanists' dismantling of the field-hegemony drew upon elements released in the crisis in the field-imaginary to turn the pervasive contradiction between New Americanists and establishment Americanists into resources for alternative interpretations of American masterworks. New Americanists have changed the field-Imaginary of American Studies through readings that released the repressed relationship between their literary interpretations and the political aspiration of minoritized and disenfranchised groups. As conduits for the return of figures and materials

previously excluded from the field, New Americanists acted upon their perceived responsibility to make these absent subjects representable in the field's past and present. These recovered relations enable New Americanists to link repressed sociopolitical contexts within literary works to the sociopolitical issues external to the academic field. When they achieve critical mass, these linkages change the hegemonic self-representation of the United States' culture.

The New Americanists associated the enfranchisement of minoritized and oppressed groups with the belief that the State's redistribution of recognition and rights is necessary to achieve freedom. "Freedom" is the defining trait informing the "common sense" of planetary hegemony. The Bush administration's declaration of a global war on terror enabled me to recognize the foundational error in presupposing that the state's structures of domination were also somehow capable of producing effects of emancipation.

Agamben's analyses of the interdependence of the state's sovereignty and the construction of an ongoing state of exception opened my eyes to a way out of the cycle through which the state has refunctioned social movements' demands for "freedom" and "rights" as justifications of the state's sovereignty.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben resurrected a term of art in Roman law, *homo sacer*, to define the relationship between sovereign power and humanity. *Homo sacer* is one who has been excluded from normal human law and as such is placed in a 'limit condition' between this world and the next, between properly-qualified human life and death. This limit condition corresponds to the sphere of the sovereign ban, in which bare life is included through its exclusion with the consequence that: "The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life – that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere" (*Homo Sacer* 83).

The "bare life" the *homo sacer* embodied was, from the point of view of sovereignty, "the originary political element" (*Homo Sacer* 89). If bare life named the condition that a particular individual's life form assumed in its encounter with sovereign power, the reduction of the individual to the condition of bare life also named that which inaugurated sovereign power.

Power became sovereign in and through the primordial biopolitical act of reducing human life to the condition of bare life.

In Agamben's view, the European Enlightenment instituted the sovereign subject of human rights through reduction of the individual's particularity into "bare life." Hence the politics of human rights could not oppose the modern production of bare life because it articulates the relays *within* the modern sovereign subject through which the state establishes its dominion over life itself. Agamben resurrected the archaic figure of the *homo sacer* to bear witness to the always already foreclosed fact that "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power" (6):

> Declarations of rights represent the originary figure of the inscription of natural life in the juridico-politcal order of the nation-state. The same bare life that in the ancien régime was politically neutral and belonged to God as creaturely life and in the classical world (at least apparently) clearly distinguished as zoe from political life (bios) now fully enters into the structure of the state and even becomes the earthly foundation of the state's legitimacy and sovereignty. A simple examination of the text of the Declaration of 1789 shows that it is precisely bare natural life – which is to say, the pure fact of birth – that appears here as the source and bearer of rights. (*Homo Sacer*189-90)

Agamben understands that the modern Western subject does not simply exist in opposition to sovereign political authority, but is produced through an originary sovereign relation. Agamben argues that this sovereign sphere in which life "may be killed but not sacrificed" was made concrete in sites of exception like Guantanamo Bay. According to Agamben, the conception of sovereign humanity broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who appeared denuded of all other qualities and specific relationships – except that they were still human.

For Agamben, sovereign state exceptionalism is not simply an oppressive abuse of what should otherwise be a properly-balanced relationship between liberty and security, subject and sovereign. Rather, exceptionalism is the very structure of sovereignty itself. American exceptionalism cannot be opposed to the principles of modern liberty without the potential contradiction of sovereign power defending liberty by destroying liberty.

The importance of the return of questions of sovereignty and exceptionalism for contemporary American studies became starkly evident in the unfolding of historic events: an unarmed sovereign head of state was killed in broad daylight in front of millions of spectators without anyone accused of murder, sovereign nations were declared failed states and taken over by occupying powers, the security and welfare of sovereign national peoples got ignored in the interest of remediating a sovereign debt crisis.

Agamben claimed that the modern state is not primarily based on citizens as free and conscious subjects, but on citizens as naked life. Their birth authorizes the sovereign powers. Only naked life is authentically political (*Homo Sacer* 106), and the nation's citizens are subordinated to the biopolitically-organized legal system's possibility to at any time decide the extent of each individual's rights. Each citizen is never once and for all either "in" or "out," but is rather on the threshold.

In "The Camp as the 'Nomos' of the Modern," Agamben famously described the "camp" as a state of exception: "the most absolute biopolitical space available and ever realized – a space in which power has before it pure biological life without any mediation." He proceeded to define the camp as the *nomos* (and the hidden matrix) of the bio-political space of the planet in which the state of exception has become the rule.

The camp was a breakthrough revelation for Agamben: it was produced at the point at which the political system of the modern nation-state, which was

> founded on the functional nexus between a determinate localization (land) and a determinate order (the State) and mediated by automatic rules for the inscription of life (birth or the nation), entered into a lasting crisis, and the State decided to assume directly the care of the nation's biological life as one of its proper tasks…the camp thereby was the new, hidden regulator of the inscription of life in the order…[and] is the fourth, inseparable element that has now added itself – and so broken – the old trinity composed of the state, the nation (birth), and land. The camp made the temporary state of exception permanent, locating it in space instead of time and local to the core area of power, within its territory but outside its law. (*Homo Sacer* 175)

Agamben also located an operation whereby the camp could give access to a site resistance in the following passage from Walter Benjamin's *Theses*

on the Philosophy of History: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of exception in which we live has become the rule – we must arrive at a conception of history that corresponds to this fact. Then we would have before our eyes as our collective task the bringing about of a real state of exception" (257). The normalization of the emergency state has precipitated the possibility of the emergence of what Walter Benjamin called a "real state of emergency."

The real state of emergency also opened into a still different construal of biopolitics. Michel Foucault famously narrated the history of politics in the West as the progressive intensification of life's subordination to the calculations of the state. But Agamben insisted on an affirmative disposition of biopolitics when he set the emancipatory potential of "biopolitics" in opposition to the oppressive control of "biopower."

According to Agamben, the inherent ambivalence of life itself cannot be formulated in opposition to (bio)power but only as suffused with power, indeed, as an effect of power relations. Understood in this light, biopolitics is not merely a matter of the control of individuals or the regulation of populations but of the invention of new forms of life. Since biopolitics is irreducible to biopower understood as that which constrains, regulates, destroys, or otherwise denies life, the question that my generation of American Studies scholars now confronts intersects with the work of Agamben around the shared question: "How can we articulate the relations between life and power according to individual or collective needs?"

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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, *grosso 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

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[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 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.

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[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 "L'uomo, 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

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[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

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[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

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[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 anchors[8] 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

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[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.

Part II
Interpretant, Interpreter, and the Discourse of Community

My work on language and interpretation has brought me into contact with the thought of C.S. Peirce, arguably the greatest American philosopher, a truly original thinker who foreshadows many developments of 20th-century philosophy of science, semiotics, hermeneutics, and, aspect to date little explored, the role and possibilities of rhetoric.[10] Perhaps the key element in his thought, which both confirms and allows us to elaborate our initial starting hypothesis, is that his semiotic is *both* the foundation of pragmatism as well as a key element in what I have developed into a rhetorical hermeneutics.[11] If we look at Peirce's very first major essay, "On a New List of Categories," published in 1867, (CP 1: 545-59; EP I: 1-10),[12] he introduces the notion of the *Interpretant*, a key concept of his future theory of signs, but also as what permits *mediation* and which he says "fulfills the office of an *interpreter*" (my emphasis). The interpretant is not an "accident" (6) and by definition entails a "correlate" and therefore a reference to three possible domains: a ground, the object, and once again the necessary interpreter. What we want to emphasize from this important early paper is that the third category, that of symbols, *determine* their interpretants and, revealing detail, "the minds to which they appeal by

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[10] This section is an abbreviated version of a chapter from my *The Elusive Hermes* (2013), 257-72.

[11] The reference is to the above-cited *The Elusive Hermes*.

[12] All references to Peirce's works are to the *Collected Papers*, indicated with the standard abbreviation, CP, followed by volume number and pagination. I also include references to the more easily available two-volume edition, *The Essential Peirce*, the first volume edited by Nathan Houser and Christina Kloesel, the second by the Peirce Edition Project, and abbreviated EP by volume and page numbers (see Works cited).

premising a proposition or propositions, which such a mind is to admit. These are *arguments*" (8; emphasis in the original). Arguments correspond to the Aristotelean *topics*, the linguistic constructs which are intrinsically world-oriented and interpersonal, and legitimated by situation, by purpose, by audience. Another aspect which will lay the premises for the later conflation of method and rhetoric is that Peirce is asserting the primacy of *reference* and the necessity of *correlations*.

During this early period, he published another essay titled "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (CP 5: 264-317; EP I: 28-55). Here Peirce distances himself from Descartes for rooting his principle of certainty in the ego, and shifts the emphasis again to the community, to the need of inquiry to find validation in society broadly understood or in a specific community, perhaps a professional organization. The reason is that *the very process of cognition is intrinsically related to the continuum of social forces and interactions*. Peirce soon makes evident that the very nature of knowledge is ultimately a question of *comparison* since "whatever is wholly incomparable with anything else is wholly inexplicable, [and] because explanation is bringing things under general laws or under natural classes" (I:41).[13] The way to account for their evaluation is to furnish a different viewpoint, which places one's position one step removed from anyone else's. There's a perspectivism implied in this gesture. Aware that everything the mind focuses on can be understood as a sign, he stipulates that the *content* of consciousness itself is but a sign, therefore it can be the object of thought. On this, Locke docet. The model is: A stands for a representation B in someone's field of intellection C. But having said that, we can already see how the consciousness must be receptive to and potentially capable of standing in its turn as the possible producer of D with relation to a hypothetical E. The signifying chain begins to come into view, and discourse emerges as the effective, material basis for both intellection *and* action by real human beings *in carne e ossa*.

Nearly ten years later, in 1877-78, in a series of papers published in *Popular Science Monthly*, we start to notice another development important to our investigation, and that is a previously unremarked connection

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[13] Cf. on this C. Hausman 192-94. Peirce called this first moment one of *sciousness*, therefore primordial with respect to *con*sciousness.

between method and rhetoric. In an 1878 article, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (CP 5: 388-410; EP I: 124-41), Peirce turns his attention to the notion of belief. This may at first appear odd, considering that the scientific community *strictu sensu* had declared, since the time of Galileo, that belief has no role in scientific investigation. But for Peirce, the practicing investigator must be aware of the general beliefs of the community insofar as they establish *habits*. Peirce recognizes the role belief plays in creating perspectives which are not necessarily self-conscious or are routinely systematically analyzed. But he recognizes as well that beliefs are, at some deeper level, and historically so, responsible for determining what can be termed a universal truth, even when not yet scientifically proven. One can think here of the co-existence of belief in astrology and astronomy in the 17th and 18th centuries, or the co-existence, in 20th-century physics, of the wave and quantum theories of light. For Peirce, the final upshot of thinking is the exercise of *volition*, and that's a different faculty than that of pure scientific or mathematical thinking. Perhaps some people do not want to challenge beliefs acquired through cultural habits, but for the understanding, there seems to be a latent necessary connection between theory and praxis at work here that needs to be examined.

In a sense, Peirce says, there must be continuity in that amass of presumably discrete facts out there in the world, even though reality "swims in indeterminacy."[14] Continuing his reflection, he claims that "belief is only a stadium of mental action, an effect upon our nature due to thought, which will influence future thinking" (129). So what we are dealing with at this juncture is an attempt at figuring out what may be the rules and principles for a valid, objective, dynamic approach to knowledge without, at the same time, ignoring that the scientist too – and therefore the knowledge that she seeks to unearth, formalize, and transmit to the community – actually lives and exists as a member of *that* community. Peirce says explicitly once again that "the whole function of thought is

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[14] From CP 6.138, cited in Rosenthal (5). What we can demand of the world, Peirce claims, is that it be "*reasonable*." Interestingly, in his later work Umberto Eco speaks of "ragionevolezza" instead of "ragione" as the objective of cultural interpretation and its underlying ethos.

to produce habits of action," a statement which reminds us of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. There is, in short, recognition of a *sensus communis* present in the undifferentiated mass of individuals, yet *the process of establishing what counts as valid knowledge appears to follow similar rules whether we are dealing with the doxa or the episteme.* It is an important concession to non-scientific knowledge, and Peirce was not at all intellectually disengaged from his social reality.[15] We can therefore perceive an effort to maintain a dialectical relationship between the philosopher and his society in a mutually co-enabling dynamic, for our search for knowledge "come[s] down to what is tangible and practical" and, furthermore, "there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to exist in anything but a possible difference of practice" (ibid). Would that our scientific-minded interpreters heed that! Or take Kuhn and Feyerabend seriously.

In fact, it is here that we read that any conception that we may have of an object is never something totally removed from the real world, for an object is defined actually by its effect: "our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects" (132). It is the effects that determine the meaning of a thought, and it is not by coincidence that William James refers to this 1878 paper in his 1907 lectures on pragmatism (James 1981:26). James goes on to de-emphasize the theoretical frame in order to foreground the practical one. The "pragmatic method," he writes, is really a question of "the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts." Meaning in brief is derived from habit, there may coexist many habits side by side and in complex societies any one statement about what reality is can be no more "true" than any other person's conception.

This thought probably did not sit well with logicians, positivists, transcendentalists, secular idealists, über-rationalists, and specialists in the then emerging and consolidating university disciplines. Peirce was going against the grain of the general tendency of philosophic and scientific

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[15] It is known that Peirce wrote an incredible number of reviews, traveled extensively, especially when he worked for the U.S. Geological Survey, and kept a rich correspondence. For a study on the political aspect of his thematization of belief, see Douglas Anderson in Brunning and Forster, 1997: 223-40.

communities, which since the 17th century were pruning religion, literature, myth, emotion, creativity, and the x-factor in human interaction out of the formal and restricted fields of their investigations. But such is the fate of original thinkers.

In an 1884 paper, "Design and Chance" (EP I: 215-24), Peirce reminds us of the existential, institutional, and methodological flexibility afforded by a rhetorical understanding of human discourse. Here Peirce embraces *chance* not as something to be avoided in the name of some unshakeable axiom or theologeme, or in abeyance to propositional logic, but *as the foundation of the human condition*. If we understand chance as *entropy*, we are suddenly looking at information theory. He writes: "it appears to me that chance is the one essential agency upon which the whole process depends" (219). The background to this assertion is his interpretation of the competing schools of evolution, which at the time made front-page news. In terms of the rhetoric of interpretation of any one phenomenon, or the impact of a text, Peirce claims that "explicability has no determinate and absolute limit… everything has been brought about; and consequently everything is subject to change and subject to chance" (219). Not too distant, conceptually, from both, the notion of infinite semiosis,[16] on the one hand, and that of interminable interpretation, on the other.[17] Understanding and accepting this factor is crucial to begin piecing together his overall system.

This particular setup of the nexus between theory and logic finds one more development in another 1903 lecture, "Pragmatism as the Logic of Abduction" (CP 5: 180-212; EP II: 226-41). Drawing on our starting characterization of method as the figurative "path" toward yet unknown knowledge, here in fact we meet up with the required activity of monitoring the findings along the itinerary, realigning and revising the overarching thesis in the process. The philosopher reiterates another medieval dictum, that is, that nothing is in the intellect that is not first given in the senses, (*nihil est in intellectus quid non fuit prius in sensu*), and that the necessary propensity to make abductive inferences *does* impact upon, and to some

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16 Cf. Eco 1975:71, 129, et infra.

17 See on this S. Freud, "Analysis terminable and interminable," (1953) and G. Pasqualotto, "Nietzsche o dell'ermeneutica interminabile" (1988).

sense color, the very percepts which we register and account for in the process of coming up with some stable knowledge. This is consistent with what we saw above about *an object being defined in part by its effect on something else or on its purpose for being*. Abduction, he writes, is the fundamental way in which an experiment is conducted, and it is the way in which we actually regulate our lives. This is in sharp contrast to the pre-established rules for conducting an experiment according to the mechanical and positivistic sciences.

What Peirce introduces here is a real-world consideration whereby neither logic nor science is removed from the lives of humans in a community, something which Gadamer does not take into account (nor does Heidegger or Vattimo). A worthy hypothesis seeks to explain facts, yet, he asks, "what other conditions ought it to fulfill to be good?" (235). The answer is something which is at *the basis of pragmatism*, that *something is good if it fulfills its end*. A purpose, a telos. I am aware that this raises Hegelian specters, but we must learn to get out of his shadow. So in a way, whether we are talking about a scientific hypotheses or a political strategy or just household planning, any projection is admissible in the absence of any argument to the contrary or in light of less defensible alternatives. One can sense right here how this resounds with rhetorical strategies already in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and in Perelman's *New Rhetoric*.[18]

If the word rhetoric is still indigestible to some, let us think of it in terms of Discourse, as it has become plain throughout my investigations that it *precedes* and in fact *constitutes* the necessary foundation of Logic and Method. This applies as well when, within the purview of studies on interpretation theory, scholars have been developing the notion of the groundlessness of being and knowing.[19] What we have as basic tenets of a new conception of interpretation at this juncture are:

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[18] I demonstrate this in my cited *The Elusive Hermes*, 305-20.

[19] Besides Heidegger, Vattimo and Derrida, we ought to read Joseph Margolis on this topic. See in particular his *Pragmatism without Foundations* (1986) and *Science without Unity* (1987), both of which would require an in-depth exposition. To a lesser degree, Rorty also, though not a fan of Peirce (Rorty 1982, 161), was also pointing in this direction, at least during his middle period. On anti-foundationalism, see the cited anthology by Rockmore and Singer (1992).

a. the conscious (as opposed to automatic and unquestioned) applications of method,
b. the awareness that science is intrinsically a process of discovery (and as such as being informed by chance and abduction),
c. a constant interrelating of the experiencing, investigating consciousness in relation to others, and finally,
d. the "ineliminable openness, the inherently *asystematic* nature, of both inquiry and reality." (Margolis 36; my emphasis)[20]

These aspects bring together all three of our starting hermeneutic elements, that is, the Work, the Interpreter-Society, and the Interpreting, and each and every time we focus on one of the three, we are dealing with the triad of theory-method-discourse.

Peirce's idea of pragmatism was "a method of ascertaining the meanings not of all ideas, but only as such that I term 'intellectual concepts,' that is to say, of those upon the structure of which arguments concerning objective fact may hinge." This is as close as we have come to a notion of rhetoric which is, as all forms of discourse, intrinsically *relational*, *intersubjective*, *based on fact*, *and aiming at a broader understanding of the human project* (I might add: of how some persons or groups of persons contextually understand the human project). Rhetoric entails a speaker who, insofar as he or she is always caught in the process of sign-production and sign-transmission, must make choices that invest the intellectual with the broader responsibility of being the mediator and transformer of the values of the particular society in which he or she lives. This does not in any way debilitate the scientific project, nor its intrinsic armamentarium of deduction, induction, and hypothesis forming and testing.[21] Rather, it places them within the larger horizon of intellectual inquiry and with the added onus of a responsibility

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[20] The passage continues: "For, *if* the intelligible world presupposes an ultimately impenetrable symbiosis (only partially suggested by the alternative schematisms of 'subject' and 'object' and *Dasein* and *Sein*), then *no homonomic system can be in place*, no foundationalism or transparentism is possible" (*ib.*, author's emphases). All of the authors collected in Rockmore and Singer (1992) point to the "myth" of foundationalism in Modern thought. See in particular Sandra B. Rosenthal's "Pragmatism and the Reconstruction of Metaphysics," 1992:165-88, in particular 169, 178.

[21] Cf. Edward Madden, "C.S. Peirce's Search for a Method," in Madden 248-62.

to keep the boundaries of established fields of knowledge open and free to change as contexts, habits, and needs of the community change.

To return to our initial premises and sketch a provisional conclusion. Although in the scientifically informed Marx this is seen as opposed to what we propose, we cannot operate a clear-cut distinction between theory and praxis because the very act of articulating our interpretation comprises a theoretical moment, a fore-seeing, based on our fore-having or pre-liminary grasp of the universe and its contents, therefore involving a pre-judgment, *and* the necessity to reach into and effect an action on the situation at hand. This we saw is intrinsically bound up with the methodic-rhetoric process and the temporally marked interest in, and intervention upon, that very same situation at hand. In traditional hermeneutics it is called *applicatio*, but for our context it can simply be called *praxis*.

And *praxis* is from the start *contingent*, *time-and-place bound*, directly influenced (when not determined) by the general context at hand. Specifically: the given moment where a situation occurs, each time being a specific one wherein the interpreter, the I, enters into a relation with others. I do not necessarily see it as implying something revolutionary, or of elaborating it into a programme, as Marx wished it could. But it does express the co-presence of an actor intervening upon the immediate circumstances or relations with others. Praxis, or the practice of interpretation, is not simply a description but a productive experience. As such, it is always local and is significant or acquires value in view of an objective, a local *telos*, one which need not apply to all humanity for all time and since forever, but is worthwhile in *this* circumscribed life-space or chronotope. It would be a weak *telos*, at any rate, one which accepts finitude, melancholia, a light irony, and is predisposed to tolerance of the other (at least until the other shows its fangs).

An awareness that the context or situation in which I intervene is marked by conventions, and delegated, legitimated spaces for action – say, a classroom, parliament, or an amusement park – will induce one course of action as opposed to another. Hence the reason why elsewhere I argue for the introduction, however re-conceptualized, of the notion of the *will*

(*voluntas*) or of *having to make a choice*, a conscious, willful decision to act in one way rather than another.

Hence the last word of my title, a local purpose, and why we needed to recover some insights from the founder of pragmatism.[22]

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[22] But we must read philosophy and studies on rhetoric at the same time and as reciprocally enabling, for thinking in the post-metaphysical, postmodern age must focus on interpretation *and* language. We ought to re-read Chäim Perelman, who retrieved and developed ideas already in Quintilian. Perelman intends to devise a discipline which would enable one to know *what* to say, *how* and *when* and *for whom* to say it, and finally on the basis of what *specific situation*. In other words, he seeks to define the theory of argumentation as basically *a process of adaptation* between a speaker and a listener *in real-world contexts*. In their anthology, *Rhetorics and Hermeneutics in Our Time*, Walter Jost and Michael Hyde draw attention to the reciprocality of understanding and speaking (4), and to the fact that rhetorical implies *intentionality* and that therefore "theoretical reflection" does not entail "cognitive detachment, but rather the practical engagement of concrete involvement" (5). They revaluate persuasion as *practical reason*, and relation not as just another category, as in Kant, but as the foundational ante-predicative field or horizon of interpersonal exchange (23).
On a similar vein, but stressing the skeptical thread of classical rhetoric and thematizing the main concern of contemporary rhetoric, we must consider the notion of justice, not knowledge per se, as we read in James Kastley's *Rethinking the Rhetorical Tradition* (1997), which begins with an enthusiastic "Rhetoric has returned." Another excellent collection is Richard Cherwitz, ed, *Rhetoric and Philosophy* (1990), containing an article by Barry Brummet, "Relativism and Rhetoric," which makes the case for the greater philosophical relevance of skepticism, historical context, and anti-universalism, against rationalists and cognitivists. See also Michael Hyde, author of a significant article, "Existentialism as a Basis for Rhetoric," in which he conjoins key topics from existentialism, – such as self, temporality, emotion, and freedom – with the eminently rhetorical preoccupation with the *Mitwelt*, that is, with the implied imperative to communication with the others, and with the sense of community (1990: 213-51). A fuller treatment is represented by the work of Stephen Mailloux, who in his *Rhetorical Power* (1989) mounts a case, both theoretical and historical, supported by proof – i.e.: actual applications of his perspective – for a *rhetorical hermeneutics*, which is anti-foundationalist in principle, and is very critical of some of the literary theories that dominated since the time of New Criticism, down to deconstruction.

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