



The Italian Difference

Italian Theory

1. After a long period of retreat (or at least of stalling), the times appear to be favorable again for Italian philosophy. The signs heralding this shift, in a way that suggests something more than mere coincidence, are many. I am not just referring to the international success of certain living authors, among the most translated and discussed writers in the world, from the United States to Latin America and Japan to Australia, leading to a resurgence of interest in Europe as well. There have been other cases of this sort in the past, but they have involved individuals instead of a horizon: a group that in spite of its diversity of issues and intentions somehow remains recognizable by its common tone. This is precisely what has been taking shape in recent years, however, with an intensity that recalls the still recent landing of “French theory” on the coasts and campuses of North America.¹ Like what happened with other philosophical cultures—in the early decades of the twentieth century in Germany, between the 1960s and 1980s in France, and in the last two decades of the twentieth-century in the English-speaking world—Italian philosophy is now entering into an analytical and critical relationship with the dominant features of our time, to a greater degree than other traditions of thought. Of course, as often happens in the circuit of ideas, what appears to distinguish a given concep-

1. See François Cusset, *French Theory: Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Cie et les mutations de la vie intellectuelle aux États-Unis* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005).

tual horizon as independent also arises out of a process of contamination and elaboration of currents previously set in motion elsewhere, but which only in this new tonal register take on the thematic stability and conceptual force necessary to expand beyond their national confines onto a much wider scene.

However that may be, the perception of Italian philosophy outside Italian borders has changed in a matter of a few years. If we take as a point of comparison three anthologies of Italian contemporary thought appearing in English over the last twenty-five years, the perspective they point to appears to be on a continual rise. In the first, published in the late 1980s with the title *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, the “Italian difference” that the editor rightly stresses in comparison with analytic philosophy as well as other strands of continental thought is attributed to two deficiencies, one linguistic and the other historical:² first, to the meager expansive capacity of the Italian language compared to English (and to French for a long time as well); and second, to the autarkic closure of Italian culture during fascism. Even after the Second World War, when an attempt was made to be less provincial by absorbing foreign-derived concepts and vocabulary, it was precisely due to this eclectic attitude that Italian thought is said to have demonstrated insufficient theoretical independence and originality. Its only distinguishing feature, dating back to the work of Giambattista Vico, later taken up and developed mainly by Benedetto Croce, would seem to be a kind of conservatively toned historicism, recognizable in its tired, weakened form in the post-Heideggerian hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo. Even Vattimo’s polemical confrontation with Emmanuele Severino, which the editor of the anthology sees as the most significant outcome of the Italian philosophical debate, somehow remains conditioned by this historicist cast, resolving itself in an opposing stance on the nature of becoming. In a nutshell, rather than opening up a new set of problems, Italian philosophy is judged to merely translate into its historicist vocabulary hermeneutic or metaphysical questions inherited from European thought.

Already in the second anthology, which appeared in the mid-1990s with the less neutral title *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, the change in interpretative framework is evident not only from the choice

2. Giovanna Borradori, ed., *Recoding Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

of predominantly political philosophy topics and writers—in itself symptomatic of a different perception of the specificity of Italian thought—but also by a different assessment of its role.³ Directly influenced by the political and social struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, but also by the reflux that followed in the next decade, for the editors, “Italian theory” is a sort of privileged laboratory that other cultures lacking in these experiences, and therefore further behind in their development of political theory, can tap into for innovative paradigms. The implicit conclusion that follows from this view turns the previous assessment on its head: precisely because Italy has lagged behind in completing its process of modernization due to the cultural blockade erected by fascism, Italian thought is now better equipped than others to deal with the dynamics of the globalized world and of the immaterial production that characterizes the postmodern era.

The title of the third, most recent anthology reflects a focus that is increasingly honed on *The Italian Difference Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*. The line of difference is shifted still further forward, based not only on the often antagonistic relationship with the unique political landscape of contemporary Italy but also on specific topics.⁴ Nihilism and biopolitics are presented by the editors as the two axes along which Italian philosophy tends to enter into critical confrontation with its time and, at least in some ways, to guide international debate. While it is true that they both originated elsewhere—nihilism in Germany and biopolitics in France—the fact remains that the work of Italian thinkers on these subjects is precisely what allowed, or caused, their growing diffusion. This is especially true for the category of biopolitics, now permanently installed at the heart of international philosophical, political, and juridical discussion.⁵ Coined in the mid-1970s by Michel Foucault, only at the end of the late 1990s did it achieve the broad currency that has made it one of the world’s major themes in the philosophy of the new century. Why? Why, after twenty years of latency, during which it remained largely inactive, did this paradigm have to go

3. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

4. Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, eds., *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics* (Melbourne: re-press, 2009).

5. The category of nihilism as developed by Italian thinkers also presents strongly original traits. See the genealogy of the concept traced out by a significant writer on the Italian philosophical scene, Sergio Givone, in *Storia del nulla* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1996).

through a number of Italian interpretations (albeit diverging or even at odds with each other) to find such transnational resonance? The editors of the anthology respond by referring to the particular capacity of Italian thought to situate itself at the point of tension between highly determined historical-political events and philosophical categories of great conceptual depth. The peculiarity of contemporary Italian thought resides precisely in this unprecedented double vision: a split gaze focused on the most pressing current events [*attualità*] and at the same time on the dispositifs that come with a long or even ancient history. Nihilism and biopolitics, in the unsettling, antinomic way they are articulated, are an exemplary distillation of this principle. While they stand on the shifting line of contemporariness, they overlook a metapolitical ridge that makes them adaptable to a wide variety of contexts. Although they come with a sophisticated theoretical apparatus, they have become part of such diverse disciplines as cultural studies and the domain of aesthetics, legal hermeneutics, and gender discourses. By projecting the archaic onto the heart of the present [*l'attuale*], or by exposing the present to the archaic, these categories diagonally connect knowledge and power, nature and history, technology and life. From this point of view, the Italian difference appears less as the recurring typology of a given tradition than a sort of semantic commutator that cuts across the entire panorama of contemporary thought, altering it in the process.⁶

2. But to get a feeling for the Italian difference and to understand the reasons behind its growing reception we need to start outside it—namely, from the general difficulty that contemporary philosophy is experiencing at this stage. It has been widely accepted that contemporary philosophy has been showing signs of uncertainty and even weariness for some time now. A radial look at its most traveled trend lines provides immediate confirmation of this impression. The analytic tradition, in its various branches and internal transformations, is engaged in a complex process of replacing its paradigms due to an obvious inability to expand its audience beyond a narrow circle of specialists. Critical theory, the dominant producer of German thought along with hermeneutics, does not appear to be in any better

6. As further testimony to the wave of interest that Italian philosophy has encountered in North America, see the recent overview by Brian P. Copenhaver and Rebecca Copenhaver, in *From Kant to Croce: Modern Philosophy in Italy, 1800–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

condition, an impression that is also confirmed by a quick comparison between the earliest and latest productions of the glorious Frankfurt school. But even the health of French deconstruction in its poststructuralist and postmodern versions doesn't look any rosier. Still mourning the death of its most prestigious members, from Jean-François Lyotard to Jacques Derrida, although continuing to produce texts of some importance, it tends to shut itself up in a circuit of formulations that are often brilliant but ultimately repetitive and even self-referential. This is not to say, of course, that these schools are entirely devoid of vital elements or that one or both of them cannot reinvigorate their themes and conceptual lexicons. But it seems to me undeniable that something more than a setback is involved.

What is the underlying cause? I don't think it is just a question of communication difficulties or generational change; rather, it is something deeper, something that in a certain sense, despite the glaring differences, unifies these currents into the same transcendental horizon that, for reasons we will now examine, is foreign to much of Italian philosophy. I am referring to the dominant role the sphere of language plays—in different ways, of course—in all three of these traditions. While analytic philosophy was created explicitly for the critical analysis of philosophical language—of its improper deviations from ordinary language, or at least from given procedural rules that were definable from time to time—hermeneutics views the interpreting subject as always immersed in a pregiven linguistic situation which determines all its types of practices. Similarly, deconstruction, as it was intended by Derrida in particular, also starts from the assumption of the linguistic nature of all experience and seeks in writing the original key to dismantle the founding categories of Western knowledge by calling into question their hegemonic potential. At issue in each of these strands of thought is the problem of meaning in its relation to a possible and, to some extent, inevitable metaphysical closure: for analytic philosophy this is caused by logical-linguistic errors that threaten logical thought; for hermeneutics by the alleged transparency of a truth that by its very nature evades simple evidence; while for deconstruction it is ultimately coextensive with the entire history of thought. From this point of view, the three fundamental vectors of contemporary philosophy are all strongly marked, and possibly even constituted, by the linguistic turn that surreptitiously connects seemingly disparate or even contrastive conceptual chunks like those of Gottlob Frege and Martin Heidegger. For analytic philosophers, the orig-

inal content, the raw material, is the set of linguistic statements; hermeneutics locates the possibility of interpretation at the heart of a given language; while deconstruction situates itself at the point of intersection and tension between speech and writing. Whether expressed more in an ontological sense, in an epistemological sense, or in a textual sense, the primacy of language is presumed in all these perspectives. Even the most recent shift toward cognitive psychology and the neurosciences that analytic philosophy has been making while going through its identity crisis remains essentially in the same field, extended now to the language of the brain, understood in its turn as a form of natural hardware. Regardless of which perspective you have on the philosophical quadrant of our time, from logic to phenomenology and pragmatics to structuralism, language appears to be the epicenter where all the trajectories of thought converge. In a perspective that pushes forward even beyond Heidegger's ontology to involve the spheres of action (in Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas, but also in John Austin and John Searle), subjectivity (in Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur), and the unconscious (in Jacques Lacan), language can even be considered the "dwelling of Being." Lacan is not the only thinker who believes that language is what speaks in human beings—and not the other way around—since the signifier precedes and determines the signified. Language is not our tool; rather, it is the only access through which we can connect ourselves to the occurrence of Being, the very place where we dwell, or to use different but equivalent wording, toward which we are always "on the way."

But as far as the incipient crisis of all these various linguistic or meta-linguistic philosophies are concerned, even more important is the antiphilosophical (or at least postphilosophical) consequence they simultaneously presuppose and entail. The fact that the entirety of contemporary philosophy (in some respects from Hegel onward, certainly beginning with Wittgenstein and Heidegger, continuing along a bumpy track that arrives at Theodore Adorno, Richard Rorty, and Vattimo) places itself in the self-confuting framework of its own end,⁷ yielding to that attraction for the "post-" that dominates the entire semantics of late modernity, is precisely connected with its subordination to the linguistic sphere. Once language, given its irremediable fragmentation into dialects or families of expres-

7. For more on this issue, but also for a comprehensive atlas of contemporary philosophy, see Franca D'Agostini, *Analitici e continentali: Guida alla filosofia degli ultimi trent'anni* (Milan: Cortina, 1996).

sions, declares its partial nature—namely, a structural inability to formulate models of universal or universalizable rationality—the only room left to philosophy is its own self-negation or weakening pursuit. Reading in succession three influential texts that are largely symptomatic of this skeptical attitude of contemporary philosophy—Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and *La crisi della ragione* (The crisis of reason), a collection of essays published in Italy in the wake of similar tendencies—provides a significant cross-section: the present task of philosophy is apparently a self-critical refutation of its own hegemonic claims to a Real that is located outside its reach.⁸ Whence its necessarily negative tones, in both a general sense and a technical sense: contemporary philosophy affirms itself only by negating itself. Because any hold on its object is elusive in principle, contemporary philosophy can only grasp it through a reverse approach, through its unsaid or unthought. Which is why, according to a dialectical formula that has become a commonplace, everything that is utterable presupposes silence, just as every representation presupposes a point of invisibility lying behind it. Far from creating its own concepts, a philosophy of this sort must confine itself to dismantling them or hunting them down without ever being able to reach them, in a chase at the end of which looms its own dissolution.⁹ For this reason philosophical criticism regarding the outside world can only be expressed in the form of its own internal crisis. Once the possibility of thought, and therefore also of action, becomes dependent on the transcendental of language, it is as if the philosophical experience were continuously sucked into the same entropic vortex it seeks to escape.

3. If this is indeed the horizon in which contemporary thought experiences both its depth and its limit, then a large part of Italian philosophy can be said to lie outside it. This is not to suggest that the sphere of lan-

8. Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979) (English trans.: *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984]); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Aldo Gargani, ed., *La crisi della ragione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979).

9. This is the thesis that Alain Badiou also arrives at, starting from a different set of premises, in *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

guage doesn't constitute a terrain of philosophical investigation in Italy. On the contrary, starting from its origins with Dante and then throughout the period of Humanism up to Vico, language has been one of its privileged topics of reflection, contemplated from a unique angle that sometimes interweaves thought and poetic experience, as in the case of Giacomo Leopardi. Hermeneutics and semiotics have also found fertile ground in Italy, with authors like Luigi Pareyson, Umberto Eco, Carlo Sini, Enzo Melandri, and Diego Marconi. Moreover, the most recent Italian thought takes language as a given that is so constitutive of the human being that it can be identified as the point of suture between nature and mutation, invariance and difference, biology and history. In this last formulation, however, a movement can be discerned that shifts the terms of the discourse in a new direction: rather than being examined in its autonomous structure, language is situated within a broader horizon, described in terms of biology,¹⁰ or of ontological realism.¹¹ The same shift that analytic philosophy has made toward the sciences of the brain expresses a need that in some respects is similar. Likewise, Italian feminism, initially engaged in a rediscovery of symbolic language, has begun to sense the inadequacy of the linguistic horizon with respect to something irreducibly corporeal that protrudes outside its confines, whether viewed as metaphorical or metonymic in nature.¹² It is as if at some point it began to occur to people, or it simply occurred, that there was a new "turn" coming after the linguistic one—in some ways encompassing it—that as a whole belonged to the paradigm of life. Already in the 1960s, after all, remarkably ahead of his times, Foucault had set out to problematize the transcendental primacy of language. He began by iden-

10. I am thinking of the views expressed by Paolo Virno in his seminal works. See for example his *Quando il verbo si fa carne: Linguaggio e natura umana* (Turin: Boringhieri, 2003).

11. I am referring to the philosophical work of Maurizio Ferraris, according to a particular meaning of the term *ontology* that he also discusses in his latest book *Documentalità: Perché è necessario lasciar tracce* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2009).

12. As Ida Dominijanni states in "L'ombra indecidibile," in *L'ombra della madre* (Naples: Diotima, 2007), p. 184. The same author provides a helpful overview of Italian feminist philosophy, starting from the position of Luisa Muraro, in the preface to the new edition of *Maglia o uncinetto: Racconto politico-linguistico sulla inimicizia tra metafora e metonimia* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1998), pp. 7–46. The most relevant work by Muraro in this regard is *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Rome: Riuniti, 1991). See Francesca Novello's dissertation, "A Critical English Translation of Luisa Muraro's *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*," University of Oklahoma, 1994.

tifying two other a priori notions making up the post-Classical episteme, namely, labor and life. But above all, he transformed them from simple transcendentals, in the Kantian sense of the term at least, into something slightly different because of their deep implication in the historical dimension. Of course life, labor, and language were the conditions of possibility for the formation of the nascent disciplines of biology, economics, and linguistics. And yet they were not located in the sphere of subjectivity; rather, they stood in a complex relationship with the world of history, one marked by inherence and tension. For example, with regard to life, it is obvious that Georges Cuvier was still far from formulating what with Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and then Charles Darwin would later become evolutionary theory. Yet, with Cuvier, for the first time, historicity penetrated deeply into the language of nature and into the constitution of the living being:

It is true that the Classical space, as we have seen, did not exclude the possibility of development, but that development did no more than provide a means of traversing the discreetly preordained table of possible variations. The breaking up of that space made it possible to reveal a historicity proper to life itself: that of its maintenance in its conditions of existence. Cuvier's 'fixism', as the analysis of such a maintenance, was the earliest mode of reflecting upon that historicity, when it first emerged in Western knowledge.¹³

Therefore, not only did history intervene in the definition of life—as its mode of expression—history was what, in its concreteness, made possible the new epistemic importance of life. History turned out to be a presupposition of what it presupposed: it was immanent to its own transcendental condition of experience. The result of this paradox (in semantic terms as well) that inscribed the a priori within its a posteriori was the “transcendental-historical,” a notion used by Foucault as a genuine oxymoron.

Without pursuing the matter to the extent it deserves, and indeed, taking another tack altogether, it can be said that contemporary Italian philosophy pushes the dialectic of the “quasi-transcendentals,” as Foucault himself called them,¹⁴ to its densest point of synthesis. The act of questioning the transcendental primacy of language—assumed as such by the two strands of hermeneutics and analytic philosophy—is not meant to deny its impor-

13. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); English version: *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 274.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

tance, but rather to reconstruct the relationship that binds the primacy of language on the one hand to the biological substratum of life and on the other hand to the shifting order of history. To this end, however, another passage is required, situated precisely at the point of intersection between life and history that is constituted by politics. In this case, too, it is necessary to pass by way of Foucault, not only via the archeological route, but also via the genealogical one opened up before him by Nietzsche. From this point of view, not only are the conditions of possibility of the various disciplines of knowledge at stake, but also their performative effects. If human life, including the function of language that defines it as such, has become entirely historical, this means it is subject to political practices intended to transform it, and thus, inevitably, it is a matter for conflict. Coming from this angle, contemporary thought—still stuck in the postmodern celebration of its own end—may just find some leverage to resume functioning in an affirmative mode. Of course the opening referred to here is only one of the possible exits out of the long-standing impasse of contemporary thought. A number of thinkers who have already embarked on this path, in North America as well as in Europe, have achieved significant results. But Italian theory, as expressed by individuals and as a whole, seems more prepared to follow it to the end, if only because in some way the route is already familiar to them, imprinted as it is in their genetic heritage. The impact force of contemporary Italian philosophy also stems from its deep rootedness in a tradition constructed from its beginnings around the categories under discussion. Since its inception between the early sixteenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries, life, politics, and history have been the axes of flow for a reflection that has largely remained extrinsic to the transcendental fold in which the most conspicuous, influential area of modern philosophy remains enveloped to this day. Unlike the tradition between Descartes and Kant, which was founded in the constitution of subjectivity or theory of knowledge, Italian thought came into the world turned upside down and inside out, as it were, into the world of historical and political life.

This movement toward the outside has long been identified by critics as the most consistent trait of the Italian philosophical tradition. Both the characteristics usually attributed to it, the epithet of “civil philosophy”¹⁵—

15. Without citing the extensive and well-known bibliography on Eugenio Garin, see also Giuseppe Cacciatore and Maurizio Martirano, *Momenti della filosofia civile italiana* (Naples: La Città del Sole, 2008).