

THE ITALIAN TRADITION OF HERMENEUTICS AND THE PROBLEM OF ARTISTIC TRUTH

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Abstract

This contribution thematizes the Gadamerian legacy in the context of the Italian philosophical debate, attempting to understand whether this debate can contribute to rethink the vitality of the hermeneutic tradition and the future of its possible developments. When, in 1972, Gianni Vattimo, one of the key figures in contemporary Italian thought, published his seminal translation of Truth and Method, Gadamerian themes began to circulate, in Italy, based on a specific interpretation: The Italian hermeneutic debate received the project of Truth and Method as a kind of philosophical defense of the humanistic tradition. As the inventor of the "weak thought," Vattimo defended the idea that the 'weakening' of the project of the world's scientific rationalization could enhance other experiences related to truth, namely humanistic, artistic, literary, and religious ones. Just like then, the triumph of scientific rationality and calculative thinking places contemporary hermeneutics in front of a daunting task. One must ask whether hermeneutics, in order to remain faithful to the Gadamerian project, should remain essentially a project of metatheoretical foundations of textual interpretation, endowed with a historically and linguistically informed approach, or it should rather radically rethink its relationship to the problem of 'method.' To avoid this deflation of the Gadamerian tradition, one possible way forward is to orient hermeneutic research toward a 'hard' and philosophically grounded idea of objectuality/objectivity, but at the same time not methodologically sterile, that is, not flattened on the methods of the 'hard sciences'.

Keywords: Hans-Georg Gadamer, Gianni Vattimo, hermeneutics, Italian philosophy, art, truth

1. Two perspectives

In 2014, Massimo Cacciari, one of the key figures of the contemporary Italian philosophical debate, published one of his most fascinating works: *Labirinto*

filosofico. His text opened with a statement that places the question of hermeneutics under a very peculiar light. Cacciari writes:

The difference that can arise, at the beginning of philosophy as a specific discipline, between philosophy *eis tas praxis* (according to Isocrates' expression), addressed as such to the consideration of the different forms of doing constituent-forming the life of the *polis*, and philosophy as a dialectic of ideas [...], or philosophy as an authentic *encyclopedia of philosophical sciences* (Aristotelian idea; and it is no coincidence that the chapter dedicated to the Stagirite is the most extraordinary of the *Hegelian Lectures on the History of Philosophy*) makes a distinction within a common space, certainly not an abstract separation [...] (Cacciari 2014, 11-12).

Reflecting on the connection between theoresis and praxis in the constitution of the *bios theoretikós*, Cacciari continues: "If we reconsider this link in the classics, nothing will appear less philosophical and scientific than that 'popular thought' around the 'two cultures', which smuggles, on one hand, philosophy as an 'infinite' hermeneutic exercise and, on the other, science as deterministic reductionism" (Cacciari 2014, 12). How should these lines be read? The first consideration to be made is the following. Philosophy is still ascribed here a systematic cognitive task. The task of philosophy, far from being exhausted in a mere reporting of cognitive and explanatory positions devoid of any epistemic power, claims its *structural* link not only with science, but also with the 'whole'. Starting from the suggestions that we can draw from Cacciari's passage, philosophy can be declined according to three interpretative lines. i) In the first place, as *philosophia eis tas praxeis*, or as a philosophy that thinks the different "forms of doing", conceptually relocated in the structured life of the *polis*. ii) Secondly, philosophy can be declined as a specific "dialectic of ideas", science of concepts – i.e., to be looked at as the knowledge that provides the logical framework of the world. iii) Thirdly, it can be considered as a veritable *encyclopedia of philosophical sciences*, claiming the literally *systematic* character of its investigation. In this sense, the encyclopedic need of philosophy, in a line of continuity from Aristotle to Hegel, does not seem an *exhausted* task. This encyclopedic need of philosophy cannot fade because it is only through this need that philosophy can reflex on everything. "*Meléte to pan*", "take care of totality": this is how pre-Socratic philosophical wisdom was expressed. Not only does philosophy constitute a project for thinking the whole, but philosophy as such must *constitute itself* as a whole (science of totality, and *intrinsic* 'scientific totality' too), in order to theoretically think of the whole. This thought of the whole, according to Cacciari, stands in open

contradiction with the idea that there are *two* irreconcilable perspectives (no longer a 'whole'), two views, two approaches on the totality, and that they can be abstractly divided, or even opposed. According to the Italian philosopher, these two perspectives risk replicating an *abstract separation* between humanistic culture and scientific culture, bringing back to the center of contemporary debate a dispute, those of the so-called 'Two Cultures', which has exhausted the explanatory momentum of its origins. And this is precisely where hermeneutics comes into play.

How should these two 'blocks', which divide the 'whole' of knowledge, be thought? According to the scheme traced by Cacciari, the contemporary cognitive landscape is crossed by two fundamental approaches, which split the whole of knowledge into two abstractly opposed blocks. On the one hand, a deterministic scientific reductionism, which claims to have an epistemic monopoly of knowledge of totality, forcing every reality and every knowledge to criteria of integral mathematization, computational modeling and empirical causality. It is certainly a 'popular' discourse, but it constitutes the theoretical background through which the contemporary gaze thinks about the totality of reality. This background not only exhibits a scientist matrix, but risks defending an idea of post-positivistic science, consisting of reductionist and deterministic cognitive protocols, which already seem to be in crisis *even in the heart of scientific research*. (Do not forget that Massimo Cacciari has long analyzed the epistemic fractures triggered, within our image of the world and the structure of scientific investigation as such, by the great revolutions of twentieth-century physics, and its philosophical implications. See Cacciari 2005). On the other hand, a 'humanistic' landscape is evoked, dominated by the idea that philosophy can be reduced to a mere hermeneutical interpretative activity of a textual canon, an activity that can therefore be reduced to a sort of a historicizing *magna glossatura*, whose meaning consists only in the paraliterary pleasure of attending prestigious texts of a past, deprived of any grip on the investigation of reality (investigation definitively delegated to the 'hard sciences'). According to this idea, hermeneutics is seen as a philosophical space that is certainly legitimate, but that risks not questioning a central aspect of the reading and of the transmission of philosophical texts, namely their *epistemic validity*. Understood in this way, textual interpretation is therefore resolved in an "infinite hermeneutic exercise", where the 'outside' of the text, its epistemic grip on reality, and therefore its *truth*, is not sufficiently valued. (It should not be forgotten that the Italian philosophical tradition was dominated, in large areas of the twentieth century, by the Crocian tradition, where

the aspect of historical reconstruction sometimes ended up prevailing over the link with the real metamorphosis of the scientific *episteme* and, more generally, of the constitution of the encyclopedia of knowledge.)

How, then, should this rift be thought? Cacciari's 2014 text seems to start from here. How is it possible to understand reality *philosophically*, in an era in which the need for totality inscribed in the destiny of philosophy is split between two irreconcilable perspectives, namely the techno-scientific approach of deterministic and reductionist matrix, and the hermeneutic approach of a pure textual transmission, deprived of the task of understanding reality? Cacciari's text dares an answer. In the tortuous itinerary of the book – it is really a *philosophical labyrinth* – the question is once again that of the 'thing', of the *res*. The 'thing' of philosophy coincides with a philosophical interpretation *of the thing: res philosophiae*. It is only starting from a renewed interest in the thing that philosophy can rediscover its cognitive task and not lose its connection with reality. The problem that emerges, however, from the very first pages is to think about the *statute* of interpretation and try to measure how the hermeneutic exercise does not remain in the limbo of a mere textual interpretation, but that of measuring, at each line, the *epistemic validity* of the *interpretandum*. And that's not all. Hermeneutics, in the present stage of contemporary sciences, must also come to terms with the prestige and the epistemic force that the 'hard sciences' exhibit. It is therefore not a question of recovering the problematic attachment of hermeneutics to the problem of the epistemic validity of the interpretandum, but also of revealing, at every moment of the hermeneutic discourse, the *meaning* and *legitimacy* of the hermeneutic approach, in a landscape that is hostile to this type of considerations. One will have to ask: is it possible to defend the hermeneutic project, and therefore the legacy of Gadamer, in an era in which the epistemic and explanatory domain of the hard sciences seems unchallenged?

2. Systematicity of philosophy

That philosophical investigation structurally has to do with the whole is well indicated by Gadamer himself, in a passage that opens the collection of essays significantly entitled *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft*. The chapter from which the quotation is taken bears the title "The philosophical character of the sciences and the scientific nature of philosophy":

It is evident that what we call philosophy is not science in the same way as the so-called positive sciences are. It is not the case that philosophy has a positive datum alongside the standard research areas of the other sciences to be investigated by it alone, for philosophy has to do with the whole. But this whole is not merely, as is true of any other whole, the whole comprised of all its parts. As the whole, it is an idea that transcends every finite possibility of knowledge, and so it is nothing we could know in a scientific way. Yet it still makes good sense to speak about the scientific character of philosophy. By philosophy one often intends a congeries of such subjective and private matters as the unique world view that fancies itself superior to all claims to scientific status. In contrast to such an opinion, philosophy can be justly called scientific because in spite of every difference from the positive sciences, it still possesses a binding proximity to them that separates it from the realm of the world view based upon strictly subjective evidence (Gadamer 1981, 1).

First, it is useful to point out that, here, philosophy is not looked at as a specialized knowledge alongside other forms of knowledge. To philosophy is ascribed the task of thinking about its structural connection with Science and Reason. Philosophy's field of inquiry is the *whole*, it is the totality itself. Philosophy, to be such, must be able to be a 'science of totality'. But, according to Gadamer, this totality "exceeds all possibilities of finite knowledge," and therefore it necessarily falls beyond the limited, regional, partial, disciplinarily divided domain of scientific inquiry. Hence, philosophy is in a paradoxical situation. It can in no way think of itself as a *specialized* discipline, alongside other areas of specialized knowledge, because it structurally has to do with the totality. However, it unfolds at a time when specialized scientific knowledge seems to hold the monopoly of the investigation of reality. This domination forces philosophy to the role of a 'part', within a compound made up of unrelated parts. These unrelated parts, *loci* of the finite, fail to compose a unitary, coherent, symphonic idea of knowledge. Philosophy, in this sense, seems to be the knowledge that guards the idea of totality. Here a principle of systematicity of knowledge seems pertinent, in search of a 'whole' that the individual specialized sciences are not given to see.

However, alongside this ambition of totality and systematicity, a principle of relativity, partiality and modesty also seems structural to philosophical hermeneutics. Why? On closer inspection, hermeneutics has a 'secret'. What is the 'secret of hermeneutics'? The secret of hermeneutics is to *know* that, when we practice philosophy in the contemporary context, we are the heirs of a very long tex-

tual tradition, whose understanding hermeneutics is responsible for. If hermeneutics has enjoyed wide international philosophical prestige for decades, the fact is mainly due to its 'principle of modesty'. Hermeneutics starts from an evident fact: the vastness and prestige of a historical-philosophical tradition, which dominates every speculative effort. Every philosophical statement should 'hermeneutically' deal with the evidence of a precedence: it comes *after* a thousand-year textual history, in which "everything has already been said". Every philosophical statement should therefore come to terms with the *structural epigonality* of contemporary philosophical discourse. The tradition seems exhausted, something seems *finished*. The speculative momentum has been 'exhausted', it has collapsed into an inert textual corpus, which hermeneutics has the task of exploring, interpreting, transmitting. This awareness of epigonality constitutes an exercise in modesty, which really represents a sort of 'transcendental' of contemporary continental philosophical discourse.

Perhaps the clearest words of this orientation are those written by Günter Figal in the opening pages of his *Der Sinn des Verstehens*. According to Figal, contemporary philosophy, looked at in the light of hermeneutic experience, starts from a historical-factual fact. The word of contemporary philosophy comes *later*. To do philosophy in our time is to do philosophy *after all*. To do philosophy 'hermeneutically' means to know that you are doing philosophy 'after philosophy'. In this sense, philosophy, starting from this evidence, must deal with the vast repertoire of themes, problems, hypotheses, solutions, which have been envisaged in centuries of debates and textual traditions. This is where its newfound *modesty* is founded. "All philosophical questions have already been posed," says hermeneutics. Starting from Figal's passage we can deduce some fundamental features of the hermeneutic approach, typical of certain contemporary philosophy.

First: the *idiomatic character* of knowledge. This first aspect concerns not only one of the most profound 'articles of faith' of hermeneutical knowledge, namely its linguistic character, but also the articulation of knowledge in a *given* historical language. The whole third part of Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* is dominated by this problem. The connection between language, comprehension and hermeneutics is original and structural, due to the fact that "die Sprache ist das universale Medium, in dem sich das Verstehen selber vollzieht. Die Vollzugweise des Verstehens ist die Auslegung" (Gadamer 1960, 392). But, if *Sprache* is a universal and universalizing *medium*, the different historical languages constitute the multiple and different idiomatic incarnations of the *Sprache*. Hermeneutical knowledge, therefore, cannot immediately conceptualize an abstract universality.

This abstract universality is generated by a symmetrical abstraction concerning language. There is not, strictly speaking, *die Sprache*. There are certain natural historical languages, which, each in its own way and according to the expressive peculiarities of each grammar and each 'poetics', can aspire to a possible universality only through the most eminent hermeneutic practice, that of *translation*. It could be said that the true *Sprache* of hermeneutics is translation, and the *medium* of understanding is reached only by the living practice of translation dialogue. It is no coincidence that Gadamer, even before conceptualizing what he calls the "*Sprachlichkeit als Bestimmung des hermeneutischen Gegenstand*" (Gadamer 1960, 393, III.1.a), traces a philosophical examination of the concept of translation. If dialogue between languages is the ideal place for understanding the hermeneutic experience, "so wird der sprachliche Vorgang besonders aufschlußreich, in dem ein Gespräch in zwei einander fremden Sprachen durch Übersetzung und Übertragung ermöglicht wird" (Gadamer 1960, 386). The modesty of the contemporary philosophical enterprise also passes through this hermeneutic awareness of the partial, idiomatic, and 'dialectal' character of knowledge of totality.

Secondly, the historical *transitory* character of knowledge. The humility of the claims of reason, as outlined by the hermeneutic tradition, is essentially connected to the awareness of the historical partiality of the figure in whom knowledge is embodied. Without falling into a generic historical relativism, hermeneutics structurally reflects on the transitory and historically situated character of each of its speeches. Philosophy, understood in this way, constitutes a self-reflective assessment of the *place* and *time* in which knowledge is articulated, without being able to boast an abstract universality, a ubiquity, and an absolute timelessness of its statements. It is a hermeneutically shrewd knowledge, which is aware of not being able to sovereignly overcome one's own history. It is no coincidence that Gadamer's masterpiece devotes many pages to articulating the question of the historicity of understanding, articulated as a hermeneutical principle.

In this sense, the need for universality, which is certainly *originally* inscribed in the destiny of philosophy (and subsequently subsumed uncritically by the 'hard sciences'), is a noble trait of philosophy's ambition to understand reality. What the hermeneutic tradition invites us to do, however, is to think about the *mediated* outcome of this need for universality. This universality is an effect of translation negotiation, it is the result of a laborious work of dialogue, it is the effect of the awareness of historical becoming and of the structural changes that

invest even the smallest details of the construction of the episteme, starting from the concepts themselves. Language itself is indeed the medium of universality, but of a universality conscious of the dialogical, translational, idiomatic character of its statements. Hermeneutics invites us to reflect on the intrinsically historical dimension of languages, on the essentially palimpsest character of language. What hermeneutics makes *impossible* is a universality without roots, a universality that is not self-reflective, a universality that does not know how to think about the 'point of view' that every affirmative proposition constitutes on the totality of reality.

Third: the *perspective* character of hermeneutical knowledge. In contemporary hermeneutic attitude "the particularity and the limitation of the perspectives assumed from time to time by thought and knowledge has been questioned". The perspective dimension of knowledge does not only concern the different perspectives of knowledge on the totality of reality, the diversity of codes and interpretative lexicon that are 'supported' by the world, but also concerns the awareness of the *intentions* of the subject that formulates this view. The Italian tradition of hermeneutics is particularly sensitive to this issue. Hermeneutics is also ascribed a critical and emancipatory task (in this, less close to the somewhat more 'traditionalist' instances of the Gadamerian approach). Hermeneutics is also a knowledge that thematizes the 'who' that is involved in knowledge. The emancipatory instance typical of certain Italian hermeneutic tradition lies precisely in meditating on whether, in the place of interpretation, there is also a power relationship. Evidently, this trait enhances the Nietzschean matrix of perspectivism. According to this reading, it is not only a question of thinking about the prospective character of knowledge, according to the indications of certain passages of Nietzsche, but also of underlining another structural aspect, namely the question of what *force* takes possession of that particular interpretation. In that context, one wonders what effects of meaning are provoked by that perspective on reality, and, nevertheless, *who* or *what* has an interest in supporting that interpretative perspective. Certainly, in Gianni Vattimo's statements, these aspects are underlined. But it should also be remembered that the critical and emancipatory element typical of this reading of the hermeneutic tradition is above all based on this Nietzschean matrix, more gnoseological-metaphysical than historical-critical.

Fourth: taking charge of the limits of Reason. This last aspect concerns the way in which the hermeneutic tradition – particularly in the Italian reception – has thought about the ambitions of Reason and the tasks of philosophy. The idiomatic character of knowledge, the character of historical transitory of knowledge

and the perspective character of hermeneutical knowledge compels reason to revise its ambitions. The transitory, situated, contingent, linguistically placed, pragmatically compromised character of knowledge suggests the idea that reason is not the place where the human can make preemptory theoretical statements about everything there is, flattening every cognitive enterprise on a formal and computational model, on an ahistorical and abstractly universalizing, typical of the hard sciences. Reason, aware of its gnoseologically limited character, falls back on more modest cognitive claims. Taking charge of the limits of reason does not concern only the evidence of the historical-linguistic character of philosophical knowledge, but also innervates (or should innervate) scientific knowledge. In the philosophical gaze of hermeneutic modesty, the cognitive project of science itself should become aware of the situated, historically transitory, character of every cognitive enterprise. The appeal to Thomas Kuhn's text, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is now an established philosophical *cliché*, but, in the hermeneutic context, it represents a kind of factual proof of the intrinsically historical-interpretative character of scientific knowledge. Reason can no longer present itself as the incontrovertible 'organ', through which a perfect reflection must take place between human cognitive faculties and reality itself. (Gianni Vattimo has often pointed out the sympathetic analogies between this discourse of hermeneutics and certain positions on epistemic contingency and the 'pragmatic' tasks of philosophical discourse that are found in Richard Rorty's texts.) How should this weakening of the claims of reason be thought? How should the Italian contribution to hermeneutics be thought, through this project of rethinking the limits of the attempt at an integral scientificization of the world?

3. Weakening Reason

It is difficult to determine whether today, after so many decades of philosophical prestige, hermeneutics can still be considered a sort of *koiné*, a common idiom, of Western culture, not only philosophical (see Vattimo 1994, 3). In those pages, Vattimo inscribes within the hermeneutic tradition not only philosophical personalities such as those of Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Pareyson, who more explicitly seem to have come to terms with the theoretical project of hermeneutics, but also Habermas and Apel, Rorty and Charles Taylor, Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas (see Vattimo 1994, 3). The basic idea, according to Vattimo, is that, regardless of the different declinations given by such different authors and approaches, hermeneutics constitutes the place to rethink ontology starting from

Sprachlichkeit (see Vattimo 1994, 5). Deepening some Gadamerian and Heideggerian theoretical instances, Vattimo espouses the idea that hermeneutics cannot in any way stop at the idea that hermeneutics constitutes only a sort of theory – philosophically founded – of interpretation, but that it must enhance a true and proper ontological commitment. As Vattimo suggests, by Gadamer there is not only the problem of the truth of historical-hermeneutical knowledge (those that were embodied in the *Geisteswissenschaften* and in their methodological debate between the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries). In other words, it is not just a question of elaborating a metacritique that allows us to demarcate a more philosophically shrewd boundary between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. As Vattimo suggests, starting from the problem of the truth of that knowledge that is not reducible to the scientific-positive method, Gadamer ends up building a general theory of interpretation that makes it coincide with every possible experience of the world (see Vattimo 1994, 7).

It is well understood, then, that the problem outlined at the beginning acquires here a new and different consistency. It is no longer a question of thinking of the philosophical 'whole' as *split* into two different and irreconcilable perspectives: on the one hand a scientific reductionism, dominated by a method of empirical investigation of mathematical modeling and mechanistic determination of causality, and, on the other hand, an "infinite hermeneutic exercise". Hermeneutics, according to a reading of the Gadamerian project also given by Vattimo, could indeed constitute itself as a sort of 'humanistic defense' of the *Geisteswissenschaften* against the methodological invasion of the 'hard sciences'. But, formulated in this way, such a project could end up resembling an abstract defense of a 'particular'. Hermeneutics would become a sort of apology in defense of the legitimacy of humanistic knowledge – and of its 'truth' – against the 'method'. Once again, the totality of the episteme would find itself split into two opposing blocks, denying that ambition to totality which constitutes the fundamental trait of philosophical knowledge. The Italian specificity of the reception of Gadamer's hermeneutics (and, in this sense, the theoretical positions elaborated by Gianni Vattimo constitute a decisive passage) perhaps consists precisely in pointing out that the interpretative character of truth does not concern only the domain of the *Geisteswissenschaften* 'opposed' to the 'method' of the *Naturwissenschaften*. In that reading, the idea is claimed that *every* experience of truth is an *interpretative* experience, even that of the hard sciences. The task of reason then becomes a task of self-clarification, in understanding the *originally interpreting character of every* view of the world. The hermeneutic dimension would then become a sort

of 'transcendental' with respect to every cognitive project, including that embodied in the natural sciences. But a reason aware of these limits – that is, aware of the limited, contingent, transitory, dialogical, translative character of every experience of truth – is a reason that must abandon the conviction that it can constitute itself as a privileged place of a self-transparent and immediately referential knowledge with respect to reality. The basic thesis of the Italian reception of Gadamer proposed by Vattimo is the *structurally interpretative character of the experience of truth*.

It is better understood, then, in what sense the claim to the *nihilistic* character of hermeneutics, advocated by that tradition, should be understood. According to those readings, the transitory, historically contingent, and above all *prospectivistic* character of knowledge must be based on its original Nietzschean matrix. This matrix is essentially traced back to the idea, elaborated by Nietzsche mainly in a famous passage of his *Posthumous Fragments*, that there are no facts but only interpretations. The idea of the 'non-existence' of facts is based on the conception according to which our every view of the world is precisely *situated, placed*: the fact emerges only within a perspective framework, the openness of which no science can ascertain. Not only that, but this tradition claims the idea that the 'fact' is precisely a '*factum*', something that 'has been done' (*factum*', '*facere*'). The 'fact' is therefore something that is *elaborated*, it is the result of a 'making'. In no case can the fact be thought of as a '*primum*', as an 'origin', as an 'original point' of knowledge of reality.

The idea of a non-existence of facts risks creating an epistemological annihilation, of plunging the project of knowledge of reality into a relativistic Babel, but this nihilistic process is claimed, by that theoretical line inaugurated by Vattimo, in its liberating value, as a process of emancipation. Having overcome the idea that hermeneutics can be reduced to a mere metatheoretical framework for the foundation of humanistic knowledge and experience, hermeneutics here becomes the theoretical place that allows us to abandon the idea of knowledge as the model of an adaptation of a *theory* to the *datum*. Claiming the interpretative character (even) of scientific knowledge, knowledge can never be posed as a mere reflection of the 'mind' to the 'world' (not to forget that Vattimo enters a critical debate with John McDowell's texts). This 'weakening' process, however, has not only an epistemological or, in a broad sense, gnoseological character. This weakening must be thought of in its most general character, in its broader ontological implications. The limits of reason and the weakening of thought should in no way be thought of as a simple exercise in weakening human cognitive claims, but as a

structural destiny in which it is the Being itself that takes leave of its self-representation linked to the mere data of the facts.

According to Vattimo, hermeneutics *must* lead to an explicitly nihilistic ontology (see Vattimo 2016, 15). Why this idea? Where does this claim come from? What are the philosophical reasons for such a request? This idea, according to Vattimo, is required "by the contradiction that Nietzsche himself notes in the famous fragment of his posthumous notebooks: 'There are no facts, only interpretations', to which he added: 'And this too is an interpretation'" (Vattimo 2016, 15). Vattimo comments on the theoretical outcome of Nietzsche's passage: "If the hermeneutics of today is not completed in a nihilistic ontology, it forgets exactly this decisive conclusion and exposes itself to the deserved accusation of performative self-contradiction that realists have always believed could bring an end to nihilism, just as happened with skepticism" (Vattimo 2016, 15). The basic idea is the following: if the overall interpreting character of knowledge – and therefore hermeneutics as a 'secret' of every gnoseology – presents itself as a 'theory' that 'objectively' observes a 'fact' – i.e. "there are no facts, but only interpretations" – it falls into a self-contradiction, that is, it believes it can defend the overall interpreting character of knowledge by self-abolishing, and describing 'objectively' a state-of-affairs. What is claimed instead is the idea that, since even the thesis that "there are no facts, but only interpretations" is an interpretation, this interpretation should not be read as an 'analysis', in the style of the hard sciences, of an 'objective' description of a situation, but as an 'announcement', a historical-destineal diagnosis, an 'event', a hermeneutic self-assessment of the history of being itself. The aspect of great interest of this vision is the fact that, in doing so, the transition of hermeneutics from a gnoseological metatheory of the interpretative character of knowledge to a trait of the Being, to a real *nihilistic* ontology, is verified. Vattimo often insists that the reception of Gadamer's masterpiece cannot be reduced to an assessment of the fact that, according to the famous Gadamerian formula, "Being that can be understood is language". Hermeneutic experience cannot force the reception of *Wahrheit und Methode* to a simple metatheory of linguistic interpretation. The evidence that everything is interpretation – and even this same evidence is an interpretation – becomes an internal destiny in the history of Being, in transit towards its progressive weakening. It is for this reason that, especially in Vattimo's texts, Gadamer's name stands together with those of Nietzsche and Heidegger. The 'Gadamer event' constitutes an episode of a historical destiny within the weakened self-understanding of Being. The overall character of hermeneutics allows us to record the 'disappearance' of the *datum*, of the 'fact', of the

adaptation to states-of-things, to the pure 'logicization' of *Sprache*. In this progressive weakening, reason learns to know its limits. This weakens not only the thought, but also the very notion of reality.

4. Reality

Now, one understands well why, in recent decades, Gadamer's nihilistic reception has found itself in direct conflict with the demands of the New Realism. Within the Italian philosophical debate (but now this interpretative line has prestigious extensions also in the international debate), the claim of the structurally nihilistic character of hermeneutics (there are no facts, but only interpretations, and this is also an interpretation) clashes with the new instances that emerge from large areas of the philosophical debate at a global level (especially of analytical matrix, but not only), in which the 'return of reality' and the new prestige attributed to the concepts of 'given' and 'fact' contests at the root every hermeneutic interpretation of veritable knowledge. If, as we have seen, that interpretation of the hermeneutic constituted a sort of 'transcendental' (however 'mobile' and historicized) or constituted the place in which to ascertain the 'disclosing' character of each 'point of observation/understanding' of reality, the New Realism contests the theoretical legitimacy of this *lato sensu* Kantian 'transcendental', and demands, for science, a direct, immediate access to the facts. Knowledge is nothing more than adaptation to facts, which would present themselves before any 'hermeneutic' disclosure of meaning.

Taking this idea to the extreme, the nihilistic reception of hermeneutics aspires instead to a sort of 'derealization' of reality. Perhaps it does not contest, strictly speaking, the existence of a 'ground' for reality (what Umberto Eco, with a famous expression, called "the hard core of being"), but contests the theoretical non-taking charge of the fact that all human knowledge is structurally connected to the limitedness and finiteness of its faculties. The hermeneutic commitment is what allows us to theorize this preventive interpreting view of knowledge. But reality, thus understood, is already 'disintegrated', based on gnoseological-interpretative perspectives (see the Nietzschean line of radical perspectivism, which is based mainly on *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, on the *Twilight of the Idols* and on the *Posthumous Notebooks*), on *interests* (Vattimo often claims the possible nihilistic-hermeneutic reading of *Knowledge and Human Interests* by Habermas, see Vattimo 2016, 21), on *codes* (see the Cassirerian-Goodmanian line, clearly present in the Italian debate), on *vocabularies* (think of the fruitful

dialogue between Vattimo and Richard Rorty, especially his interpretations of Rortyan texts such *The Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*).

According to this, the call for a 'derealization' of reality has a precise liberating, emancipatory character. Not to conform to the *datum* – and therefore not to conform fideistically to the claims of 'truth' of the hard sciences – means to claim the mobile, dialogical, linguistic character of human knowledge, and the '*ad personam*' character of the philosophical text. Nevertheless, not conforming to mere *data* means defending the legitimacy of knowledge or forms of knowledge that would be challenged by the totalizing methodological claims of the natural sciences (especially religious experience, so decisive for thinkers, such as Derrida, Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, see Vattimo 1994, 3; Vattimo 1994, 53-71).

5. Truth

It is easy to understand how the question of truth, already inscribed in the title of Gadamer's masterpiece, acquires a specific philosophical consistency as soon as hermeneutics is brought into conflict with the debates on the new realism. Once again, the development of hermeneutics cannot fail to consider the growing prestige of the 'method' over 'truth'. Hermeneutic – as recently pointed out by Cacciari – cannot simply be reduced to a minority, defensive and reactive position of humanistic knowledge, aggravating the abstract separation between two opposing epistemic blocs. The basic idea of any fundamental interpretation of hermeneutics is that according to which the 'method' is possibly an *internal articulation* of 'truth'. According to that line of interpretation, it is counterproductive to think of an epistemic contrast between two blocs. Instead, the experience of truth – with its interpretive, dialogical, finite, historicized, linguistic, communitarian character – constitutes the 'disclosing of meaning' with respect to which every particular scientific methodological assessment acquires sense and direction.

It should not be forgotten that, in 2009, Gianni Vattimo returned to some of his fundamental theoretical positions in a text significantly entitled *A Farewell to Truth*. Here, once again, it is not a question of a generic 'farewell' to the idea of truth. It is not a question of wanting to sever, *in abstracto*, the connection between philosophical research and the search for truth. as Vattimo writes, Leave is taken of truth as the objective mirroring of a datum that, to be adequately described, must be fixed and stable—must literally be "a given" (which is what the word *datum* means). That is feasible in the sciences that "don't think," because

they do not query the horizon (the paradigm) that envelops them and because they ignore the totality of the dialectical relations that condition their objects (Vattimo 2011, xxxii).

What Vattimo considers *liberating* and *emancipatory* is precisely the fact that overcoming the metaphysical conception of Being as a stable ontological structure of crystallized hierarchical relationships makes us aware of the fact that knowledge is constituted by the plural and dialogical outcome around this epistemic 'void'. As Vattimo himself points out, the 'farewell to truth', in our time, risks being a factual diagnosis rather than a transformative appeal. Everywhere the post-truth instances and ideological derealization have won.

6. Aesthetics

However, one fundamental aspect must be clarified. The enlargement of hermeneutics to the broadest diameters of philosophical debate (a debate that includes, at this point, the question of truth and that of the epistemic foundations of scientific research, from the consistency of ontology to nihilism and the history of being) must not lose a point on which both Gadamer and Vattimo (and a large part of the hermeneutic tradition) converge: the centrality of art in hermeneutic experience. It is clear that the connection between the work of art and the hermeneutical task risks being obvious, internal to the thing itself. In our 'dialoguing' relationship with the work of art, the moment of interpretation becomes a structural fact (think of the paradigmatic case of music). However, what a 'strong' interpretation of hermeneutics wants to defend is not at all reduced to mere metatheoretical reflection on the interpretive, hermeneutic dimension of our relationship with the work of art but sees in art a decisive place to understand those same very general questions of philosophy evoked above. On closer inspection, the fundamental task of hermeneutics is to preserve the evidence that the work of art represents an ontological enigma, a real *mysterium metaphysicum*, which no science approaches, no methodological reductionism, can describe, understand, ascertain. The link that had been outlined between hermeneutics and nihilistic ontology does not concern only the *gnoseological* relationship between the question of interpretation and the derealization of reality. The objections of the New Realism may perhaps affect certain extreme versions of ontological nihilism *à la Vattimo*, but they certainly cannot scratch the idea that the work of art, despite being a *real object*, an *ens realissimus*, can be treated as a mere *datum*, as a mere entity among

other entities, and carelessly included in a mathematized and reductionist investigation typical of the hard sciences. The hermeneutic dimension inscribed in our relationship with the work of art does not therefore concern so much its structural link with the vast question of interpretation, but it becomes the place in which it is possible (and necessary) to theoretically preserve the *ontological mystery* that the work of art constitutes by itself.

It is thus a question of giving an even more cogent foundation to the structural alliance of hermeneutic and aesthetic experience (think of the exemplary case of the aesthetics of reception and the theses of Hans Robert Jauss). If Aesthetics ascribes to itself the task of constituting itself as a theory of experience and meditating philosophically on the vast theme of the reception of the work of art, hermeneutics could have an even more fundamental task: to preserve the fact that *it is not possible to determine the origin of art through a reductionist approach*. The objections to the strong interpretation of hermeneutics – that is, the one that goes in the direction of a nihilistic ontology – can also come from those orientations (think of the robust testimony represented by Günter Figal's masterpiece, *Gegenständigkeit*) that claim, even for hermeneutics, a rediscovered link with objectivity. This connection does not necessarily have to have the appearance of a 'new-realistic' return to the 'given', but it can also more simply represent a newfound taste for a return of the theme of 'reality', newly inscribed within the domain of hermeneutics. According to that 'milder' reading, the work of art becomes not so much the pretext for a *nihilistic derealization of reality*, but, rediscovering its objectivity, its consistency as *res* is respected, without however forgetting its mysterious ontological peculiarities.

In other words, hermeneutics, in its structural interconnection with Aesthetics, turns out to be the decisive theoretical place in which to claim the *truth of the work of art*, not so much, however, *against* 'method', *against* scientist reductionism, but encouraging a structural transformation of the episteme in its entirety (here is the totality of which philosophy is always the 'spokesperson'). This transformation must therefore defend the idea that any ontology and any epistemic vision that does not include the enigmatic metaphysical peculiarity of the work of art cannot be said to be complete. Hermeneutics, in order to defend its theoretical legitimacy, must perhaps renew its conviction that art is the great metaphysical enigma of being, without which no understanding of the totality of reality is possible. There is no understanding of reality, beyond the opposition of infinite hermeneutic exercise and deterministic scientist reductionism, without the awareness that the work of art is indeed '*res*', 'reality' – in the full 'hyper-realistic' sense of

the term – but it is also a *res specialissima*, on whose enigmatic character hermeneutics must not cease to question itself. It is not at all an exaggeration to think that, in any way we want to represent a 'new theory of everything', the aesthetic-hermeneutic nexus represents its privileged chapter (see Harman 2018).

7. The future of hermeneutics

It is difficult to determine what the theoretical future of hermeneutics and the Gadamerian project will be. Two forces seem to have a great future ahead of them: i) techno-scientific reductionism, which acts by then within the logic of academic research, now affecting even those areas traditionally protected by the methodological border between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*; and ii) a newfound philosophical interest in 'literal' Realism, which leaves little room for art to claim a fundamental experience of truth. What is certain is that the hermeneutic project, faithful to Gadamer's inspiration, must keep vigilant its relationship with the totality. It is probable that a mere humanistic defense of tradition and of hermeneutic experience risks falling back more and more on defensive and, ultimately, losing positions.

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