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REALITISM

*The Postmodern Attack on Reality*

FROM POSTMODERNISM TO POPULISM

Postmodernism came into philosophy with a short book (109 pages) by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, titled *The Postmodern Condition*, published in September 1979.<sup>1</sup> It was about the end of ideologies, that is, what Lyotard called “grand narratives”: Enlightenment, Idealism, Marxism. These narratives were worn out; people no longer believed in them; they had ceased to move people’s consciousness and justify knowledge and scientific research. It was a crisis, but (apparently) it was experienced with no tragedies, far from the dramas and guillotines of modernity, in an age that could not foresee what was soon going to happen from the Balkans to the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Manhattan. The ease with which the pandemic spread depended not only on what is so obscurely called “the spirit of the time” but precisely on the fact that postmodernism was carrying along a cosmopolitical crowd of forefathers:<sup>2</sup> the English historian Arnold Toynbee,

who spoke about it in the forties; the German anthropologist Arnold Gehlen, who theorized “post-theory” in the fifties; the American novelist Kurt Vonnegut, who mixed black humor and science fiction in the sixties; the American architect Robert Venturi, who reinstated Las Vegas’s Disney style at the beginning of the seventies. At the very beginning, in the thirties, there was even the Spanish literary critic Federico de Onís, who dubbed a poetic trend with that name.

The least common denominator of all these forerunners lies in the end of the idea of progress: the projection toward an infinite and undetermined future is followed by a retreat. Maybe the future is already here, and it is the sum of all pasts: we have a great future behind our backs. Yet, in the specific field of philosophy, we found a peculiar element, which we will tackle over and over in this book. Given that, in philosophy (and in knowledge in general), progress requires a trust in truth, the postmodern distrust in progress entailed the adoption of the idea—which finds its paradigmatic expression in Nietzsche—that truth can be evil and illusion good, and that this is the destiny of the modern world. The core of the matter is not to be found so much in the assertion “God is dead” (as Hegel claimed before Nietzsche) but rather in the sentence “there are no facts, only interpretations,”<sup>3</sup> because the real world ended up being a tale. A tale that reoccurs, according to the cyclic character of the eternal return instead of the linear becoming of universal history as the progress of civilization.

Thus far I have mentioned the strictly philosophical ideas. Nevertheless, unlike other trends and sects, and infinitely more than Plato’s attempts in Syracuse—but also more than Marxism—postmodernism found a full political and social realization. The past few years, in fact, have taught us a bitter truth. That is, the primacy of interpretations over facts and the overcoming of the myth of objectivity took place, but they did not

have the emancipative outcomes prophesized by professors. The “real world” never “became a tale”; there was no liberation from the constraints of reality—which is just too monolithic, compact, peremptory—nor was there a multiplication and a deconstruction of perspectives that seemed to reproduce, in the social world, the multiplication and radical liberalization of TV channels (as was believed in the seventies). The real world has certainly become a tale or, rather—as we shall see—it became a reality show; but the outcome was media populism, namely, a system in which (if one has such power) one can claim to make people believe anything. In news broadcasts and talk shows we did witness the realm of the “no facts, only interpretations” that—in what unfortunately is a fact and not an interpretation—then showed its true meaning: “the argument of the strongest is always the best.”

Therefore, we now deal with a peculiar circumstance. Postmodernism is retreating, both philosophically and ideologically, not because it missed its goals but, on the contrary, precisely because it hit them all too well. The massive phenomenon—and, I would say, the main cause of the turn—was precisely this full and perverse realization that now seems close to implosion. The postmodernists’ dreams were realized by populists, and in the passage from dream to reality, we truly realized what it was all about. So, the damage did not come straight from postmodernism—which was mostly animated by admirable emancipative aspirations—but by populism, which benefited from a powerful (although largely unaware) ideological support on the part of postmodernism. This had consequences that strongly affected not only the more or less vast elites that might be interested in philosophy but most of all a mass of people that never heard of postmodernism and that underwent the effects of media populism, including first and foremost the conviction that it is a system with no possible alternatives.

For this reason it is worth having a closer look at this realized and then overturned utopia by retracing the three crucial points in which I propose we summarize the postmodern *koiné*. First, *ironization*, according to which taking a theory seriously shows a form of dogmatism, and we should therefore maintain an ironical detachment toward our statements—expressed typographically by inverted commas<sup>4</sup> and even physically by flexing fingers to denote quotes in oral speech. Second, *desublimation*, namely, the idea that desire constitutes as such a form of emancipation, because reason and intellect are forms of dominion, and liberation must be looked for through feelings and the body, which are revolutionary *per se*.<sup>5</sup> And, most of all, *deobjectification*, that is, the assumption—whose catastrophic centrality will be shown throughout the book—that there are no facts but only interpretations, as well as its corollary for which friendly solidarity should prevail over an indifferent and violent objectivity.<sup>6</sup>

#### IRONIZATION

Postmodernism marks the entry of inverted commas in philosophy: reality becomes “reality,” truth “truth,” objectivity “objectivity,” justice “justice,” gender “gender,” and so forth. At the base of this new quotation-marking of the world lay the thesis according to which the “grand narratives” (rigorously between quotation marks) of modernity or, even worse, ancient objectivism were the cause of the worst kind of dogmatism.<sup>7</sup> Rather than being fanatics, it is better to turn into “ironic theoreticians” who suspend the peremptoriness of any statement they make, seeing in facts, norms, and rules an evil *per se*. (Roland Barthes well represented the *Zeitgeist* when—only half-jokingly—he said that language is “quite simply fascist”<sup>8</sup> because it has semantics, syntax, and grammar.) The quotation

mark, in its typographical variations, signifies a distancing that can also manifest lexical approximation, that is, inattentiveness, or an actual citation, that is, parasitism:<sup>9</sup> there is a reality built by others and we, as deconstructors, ironize on it, thinking we have thus done our job.

Quotation-marking is, in fact, a gesture similar to Husserl's *epoché*, to the suspension of judgment, to putting aside the existence of the objects under examination so as to grasp them in their phenomenic dimension. But compared to putting in brackets, putting between inverted commas is a very different strategy. Something that in Husserl was a philosophical exercise turns into a protocol of *political correctness* by which one proclaims that whoever dared remove the inverted commas would be performing an act of unacceptable violence or childish naïveté, claiming to be treating as real something that, in the best hypothesis, is only 'real' or "real."<sup>10</sup> This thesis, which implicitly turned into a fanatic whoever—although with full legitimacy—believed to possess some kind of truth, impeded (at least in the intentions) progress in philosophy, transforming it into a programmatically parasitic doctrine referring to science for any claim of truth and reality and limiting itself to quotation-marking. If then from the skies of theory we descend to the concrete realization of an "ironic theory" as the forever partial adhesion to our statements and beliefs, the consequences of ironization can be intuited by asking ourselves, for instance, what "an ironic postmodern witness" could be in a court where, instead of "equal justice under law," there was written "there are no facts, only interpretations." Leaving thought experiments aside and getting to real events, how little ironization entails emancipation is vastly demonstrated by the abuse of laughter, facetiousness, and farce in media populism, which instead provided a further confirmation of the ethological hypothesis that the facial expression of laughter is a legacy of the act of showing teeth—that, in animals, precedes aggression.

But what does the postmodern inclination for irony depend on? In a book that was very important to postmodernism, *Difference and Repetition*,<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze claimed that one had to do for philosophy the same thing Duchamp did for art and propose a “philosophically bearded” Hegel just as Duchamp had drawn a moustache and a beard on the *Mona Lisa*. In his review of the book, Foucault went even further (he later took it back *in extremis*, as we shall see in chapter 4) affirming that thought had to become a masquerade.<sup>12</sup>

At a closer look, the ironic drive demonstrates that postmodernism has an ancient heart. Just as a star exploded long ago keeps irradiating its light, when postmodernism entered philosophy, at the end of the seventies, its cycle was coming to an end—a cycle that had its origin in Nietzsche’s desperate radicalism, in the rebellion against systematic philosophy and in the various waves of philosophical avant-gardes that came one after the other in the twentieth century, and, even before that (as we shall see extensively in chapter 2), in Kant’s Copernican revolution<sup>13</sup> (which truly was a Ptolemaic revolution, since it placed man at the center of the universe as a constructor of worlds through concepts). In this sense, postmodernism was not philosophical trash. It was the outcome of a cultural turn that largely coincided with modernity, namely, the prevalence of conceptual schemes over the external world. This explains the recourse to inverted commas as a means for distancing: we never deal with things in themselves but forever and only with mediated, distorted, improper phenomena that are therefore placeable between quotation marks. Nevertheless, what specifically characterizes postmodernism with respect to its predecessors and forefathers is that it is a programmatically parasitic movement. In art there is a venerable work of tradition and you draw moustaches on it, or you take a urinal or a soap pad box and declare it a work of art. In philosophy you take Plato and say he was antifeminist, or you take a TV series and say that it

contains more philosophy than Schopenhauer's thought. More generally (thus completing a tendency that was already very well represented in much twentieth century philosophy), you proclaim that philosophy is dead, and that, at most, it consists of a kind of conversation or a writing genre that has nothing to do with truth or progress.

You might object that I am reducing postmodern theses, most especially its Ur-Thesis, "There are no facts, only interpretations," to a caricature. Yet, in the final analysis, this is the fundamental character of postmodernism, given that one is tempted to ask oneself: *what if the thesis consisted essentially of its own caricature?* If—in accordance with Duchamp's spirit—it consisted exclusively in emptying any argument out by turning thought into a masquerade? From this point of view, the genesis of weak thought (*Pensiero debole*)<sup>14</sup>—which I feel particularly entitled to talk about, as I have partly been involved in it and an eyewitness of it—seems paradigmatic. Scholars of different orientation and generations gather under a title of great evocative efficaciousness, but that is not truly constraining for anyone. What is being presented is not a theory but, indeed, an anthology with some valuable proposals that are nonetheless strongly dissonant. It manages to capture exactly the spirit of the time, which is that of impatience toward old academic stagnation and of the advance of media in public consideration. This perfect tuning is not limited to the national field, but it determines the international success of the homonymous book, so that little by little the very debate about *Weak Thought* leads to the persuasion that there is such a thing as "weak thought"—namely, a recognizable theoretical nucleus, or at least a "weak thought," a gust of the spirit of the time. The intimately ironic aspect of the proposal would have been even more evident had the volume carried a band saying "Ceci n'est pas une théorie." Yet, just like laughter, irony is not only detachment and nonviolence. In fact, the specific

ironic theory of weak thought, as was precociously noted,<sup>15</sup> repropounded in more than one case the characteristics of a long period of Italian philosophy: suspicion toward science and technology, traditionalism, idealism. That is, suspicion toward realism (and the idea of progress in philosophy), always seen as a penalizing mistake with respect to the flights of thought. The ideal enemy of weak thought, then, was not the declared one (namely, dogmatism) but rather Enlightenment, that is, the claim of reasoning with one's own mind, as we shall better see in the last chapter of this book. De Maistre described the protestants' spirit as: "a spirit of cavil, envious to death of being in the right—quite natural, indeed, in every dissenter, but in Catholics wholly inexplicable."<sup>16</sup> In retrospect, weak thought shows the reappearance of the Catholic polemic against the *esprits forts*, against those who bring forward the absurd claim of being right. At the same time, there is deep skepticism and radical distrust toward mankind, which is seen as being in need of salvation and redemption, as well as incapable of following Rousseau's principle used by Kant as the epigraph of his work on Enlightenment:<sup>17</sup> "Wake up, my friend, and leave childish things behind!"

It is in this anti-Enlightenment climate that—with the complicity of irony and quotation marks—the misunderstanding takes place for which right-wing thinkers become left-wing ideologues, with a symmetric inverted phenomenon to the one for which rock music (initially perceived as left-wing) was easily adopted also by the far Right. The case of Heidegger as an antimetaphysical resistant, whose organic membership to Nazism is often forgotten or underestimated, is paradigmatic in this sense. Let me offer one example out of the many possible ones. Opening his contribution to the booklet *Ragione filosofica e fede religiosa nell'era postmoderna* [Philosophical reason and religious faith in the postmodern era],<sup>18</sup> Vattimo writes that Heidegger "also made a series of 'political mistakes,' such as

his adhesion to Nazism.” Now, one wonders why Heidegger’s adhesion to Nazism is a political mistake between inverted commas, as if it were a weak mistake, perhaps not even a mistake and only a “stupidity”—*eine Dummheit*, as Heidegger described his adhesion to Nazism in his interview for the *Spiegel* in 1966.<sup>19</sup> The removal of his Nazism is due to many reasons, some of which are undoubtedly accidental or confused: for instance, the fact that Heidegger’s philosophy was adopted, in France, also by thinkers very close to the left-wing, and that in general people were willing to trust the image of Heidegger’s relation to Nazism that Heidegger himself had offered in his defense.

Among the numerous de-Nazification strategies,<sup>20</sup> in any case, none equals the plastic evidence of the *a priori* absolutism (in which, once again, quotation marks play a central role) that can be found in the curator’s note in the Italian edition of Heidegger’s *Political Writings* that refers to the closing lines of the allocution dated May 17, 1933 where Heidegger wrote: “to our great Führer Adolf Hitler a German Sieg Heil.” The curator’s comment is: “Today the expression ‘Ski Heil’ is still used—with no political connotation whatsoever—by skiers to wish one another a good ski.”<sup>21</sup> But, leaving the folklore aside, what was not seen (and provoked a semi-blindness about Heidegger’s ideological tendencies) was that Heidegger’s thought as a whole is hyper-hierarchic, and that the plea to nihilism and to the will to power, as well as the insistence on Decision and the abandonment of the traditional notion of “truth” constitute a deep and non-opportunistic adhesion to the *Führerprinzip*.

The condemnation of truth and objectivity as forms of violence and the consequent plea to an ironic pop theory thus elevate as their hero (with an undoubtedly objective irony) a philosopher that is certainly pop but utterly devoid of irony and very convinced of himself and his own “destinality.”

## DESUBLIMATION

The dialectics that manifests itself in ironization is also at work in the idea that desire can constitute an emancipative element *per se*. If Heideggerism is a right-wing movement that is adopted by the left-wing, with the desiring revolution we find a movement that—at least in the sixties and seventies—was primarily left-wing but that turned into an *instrumentum regni* for the Right. In fact, the history of populisms taught us how it is possible to develop a politics that is desiring and reactionary at the same time—after all, in line with significant precedents during the *Ancien Régime*, such as, for instance, the French aristocracy represented in Laclos’s *Liaisons dangereuses* and censored by the Jacobins. There are therefore reasons to believe that, in its return to the Right, the desiring revolution rediscovered its genuine roots. Of course, the Nietzschean plea to the body and its “great reasons,” or the critique of morals as a repressive and resentful structure, could be presented, for a while, as left-wing. Nonetheless, these elements were formed, in Nietzsche, within the frame of the theorization (that animates his entire thought) of a Dionysian revolution, where the “tragic man,” antithetic to the rational man represented by Socrates, is first of all a desiring man.<sup>22</sup> The very recognition of the political role of the body, which is part of the theoretical horizon of the radical Left of the twentieth century, finds a full realization, but, again, in a reversed way: here it is the body of the leader that becomes an intensely political element.<sup>23</sup> Now, even without calling Nietzsche into question, it would have been enough to read Wagner’s *Art and Revolution*<sup>24</sup>—written by a Wagner that seems to anticipate Marcuse—to understand that there may be a desiring revolution, but that it will still be a conservative revolution, given that desire, unlike reason, refers back to the archaic, to childhood, and to mothers.

In particular, in populism the conservative revolution manifests itself through the mechanism that was already extensively studied by Horkheimer and Adorno:<sup>25</sup> that of “repressive desublimation.” The king concedes sexual freedom to the people and, in exchange, he keeps for himself not only the sexual freedom he gave to everyone else but also all the other kinds of freedom that he takes on as his exclusive privilege. The twist between body and desire is accompanied (in accordance with the anti-Socratism of the Dionysian revolution) by a diffused anti-intellectualism, which fosters the mirroring between the people and the king that constitutes the fundamental trait of populism. In other words, where at the dawn of postmodernism there was talk of the possibility of a desiring revolution, there takes place a desiring restoration, in the sense that desire is confirmed to be an element of social control. And it is not by chance that Foucault’s change of mind that will lead him to take an antithetic position with regard to postmodernism started precisely from the issue of emancipative desire: four years after the *Anti-Oedipus*, with which in 1972 Deleuze and Guattari reaffirmed the link between desire and revolution, Foucault published *The Will to Knowledge*,<sup>26</sup> the first volume of the unfinished *History of Sexuality*, which substitutes the paradigm of emancipative desire for the thesis according to which sex is principally an instrument of control and exercise of authority, that is, the first and fundamental manifestation of “biopolitics”—which will be at the center of Foucault’s reflections to follow.

Another aspect of the repressive desublimation is the authoritative use of the Nietzschean critique of morals. Under this profile, we discover that relativism, theorized by progressives and reproached by conservatives, was in fact much more practiced by the latter, in accordance with the paradoxes of the postmodernism-populism relation we are tackling. Consider, for

instance, the apparently hyper-relativist argument of “what’s wrong with it?”—which was often used as the standard answer to the criticisms toward the twists between sex and power. Now, in “what’s wrong with it?” there intervenes a dispositive that hits the heart of a fundamental category of Enlightenment: that is, public opinion, which was born precisely as the place where the criticism of power would count as a means of control and guarantee of people’s rights. Habermas<sup>27</sup> already described the transformation of public opinion, in the media world, from a place of debate to a place of manipulation of opinions on the part of mass media owners. But “what’s wrong with it?” defines a third stage: namely, the fact that any surviving critical instance of public opinion is emptied *a priori* through the category of “moralism.” Thus, “what’s wrong with it?” presents itself as an incredibly efficacious instrument of repression of dissent and reaches its perfection when criticism is declassified to gossip. Here, too, there is an interesting mechanism. In fact, on the one hand, the charismatic personalization of power leads to the fact that all the attention is focused on the leader, his sphere and his behaviors—and this is so not due to a decision of public opinion but to a deliberate political choice typical of media populism. On the other hand, reciprocally, every criticism and dissent can now be reduced to gossip, and public opinion regresses to its pre-Enlightenment phase: that of resentful gossip on the bad costumes of the neighbors and the vices of the powerful.

#### DEOBJECTIFICATION

If, nevertheless, we look for the sufficient reason and the political engine of ironization and desublimation we find deobjectification: that is, the idea that objectivity, reality, and truth are a bad thing and even that ignorance is a good thing. Also in

this case, postmodernism gathers at least three orientations of great cultural importance.

First of all, a Nietzschean tradition that offers multiple variations of the thesis according to which truth is nothing but an ancient metaphor, namely, a sort of myth or the manifestation of the will to power; that knowledge does not possess an autonomous emancipative value but rather constitutes an instrument of dominion or deceit, and, more radically, that there exists no such thing as “truth” but only a relationship of forces and struggles.<sup>28</sup> Then, the disappearance of the difference between myth and *logos*, or between real world and apparent world, produces a second effect: the recourse to myth, which traditionally was a right-wing patrimony, is recovered by the Nietzschean-Heideggerian Left, through the project of a “new mythology.”<sup>29</sup> But the element that was by far the most ubiquitous (as it also involves a great part of twentieth-century analytic philosophy) was the one that proclaimed, with a radicalization of Kantism, that there is no access to the world if not through the mediation (which, in postmodernism, is radicalized and becomes construction) of conceptual schemes and representation.

We have a real case study on the perverse effects of deobjectification. In the mid-seventies, the epistemologist Paul K. Feyerabend affirmed that there is no privileged method for science, because in the confrontation between different scientific theories there are largely incommensurable worldviews set one against the other. In this frame, it is far from obvious that Galileo was right; rather, Bellarmine had all the rights to condemn Galileo’s doctrine, which would have had negative repercussions on the asset of a society that found its ordering principle in the Church.<sup>30</sup> It is evident that, with such a statement, Feyerabend wanted to reject a strictly positivistic conception of physics, namely, the idea that knowledge consists of a mere collection of data needless of interpretations or

conceptual schemes—and let us not forget that the context in which he expressed his position was intentionally provocative, since it was the *pars destruens* of *For and Against Method*, a book planned with Imre Lakatos and published posthumously in 1999. The outcome was that, twenty years later, Feysabend's argument was used, in all seriousness, by Benedict XVI in order to affirm that epistemologists themselves claim that Galileo was not ultimately right, and most of all in order to articulate a discourse on the bases of which human knowledge leads to antinomies (like the one setting Galileo against Belarmino), which can only find a solution in a superior form of rationality.<sup>31</sup>

This is postmodern dialectics at work. Deobjectification, while formulated with emancipative intentions, turns into the delegitimation of human knowledge and into the reference to a transcendent foundation. So, on the one hand, postmodern philosophers adhere to skepticism and have no ultimate reasons to justify Copernicus's superiority with respect to Ptolemy or Pasteur's with respect to Asclepius, because these are, anyhow, confrontations between conceptual schemes, as there is no "outside" reality. On the other hand—beyond the equivalence of things in the world and overcoming the inanity of learned quarrels—there opens up space for transcendence. Underlining "how deep the self-doubt of the modern age, of science and of technology goes today," the former pope easily recovers the prestige that the Church had lost when its worldview was contested by science. Once he is done with the defense, he can go on the attack by repropounding a *Weltanschauung* that is now doubly justified, both as a *legitimate* worldview like any other and therefore nonrejectable, and as a *more true* worldview, because it is founded "by its inscription into a greater reasonableness" and is therefore better compared to relativistic worldviews.

But the area where skepticism and the farewell to truth have shown their most aggressive side is politics.<sup>32</sup> Here, postmodern deobjectification was, exemplarily, the underlying philosophy of the Bush government, which theorized that reality was simply the belief of “reality-based communities”—that is, unwary people who do not know how things go. This praxis found its most concise expression in the response by one of Bush’s consultants to the journalist Ron Suskind: “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too.”<sup>33</sup> An arrogant absurdity, of course. Yet, eight years before that the philosopher and sociologist Jean Baudrillard had claimed that the Gulf War was nothing but a TV fiction,<sup>34</sup> playing (like Feyerabend) the role of the useful skeptic in favor of a cause that was certainly not his own.

#### FROM REALITISM TO REALISM

The final outcome of the joint action of ironization, desublimation, and deobjectification can be called “realism”:<sup>35</sup> an entirely contingent name (as it refers to TV reality shows) that, nonetheless, captures the substance of that “world well lost”<sup>36</sup> in which postmodern thinkers saw the bright side of the age. Any authoritativeness of the real is cancelled, and, in its place, a quasi-reality is arranged with strong fictional elements, resting on three fundamental mechanisms. The first one is *juxtaposition*, for instance, in TV programs in which a report on atomic fission can be followed or preceded by one on reincarnation. The second is *dramatization*: you take something real and dramatize it with actors, turning it into a piece of semi-fiction. The third could be called *dreamization*: what is life in a reality

show? Dream or reality? With this strategy, a fully realized postmodernism manifests itself as a violent and inverted utopianism. Instead of recognizing the real and imagining another world to realize instead of it, postmodernism regards the real as a tale and assumes that this is the only possible liberation: since there is nothing to realize and, after all, there is nothing to imagine, it is a matter of believing that reality is like a dream—harmless and fulfilling. Obviously, these three procedures can be combined with huge outcomes, exploiting the reality effect deriving from the use of the television medium and especially of news and reportages (“it must be true, TV said so”). Thucydides already put in historical characters’ mouths discourses largely made up by him, but in the society of communication and recording there seems to be a change in status, due to the quantity of material online. The overall effect is to blur the dividing lines not only between reality and fiction but also between science, religion, and superstition.

As such, realism is therefore not a simple postmodern product. It has an ancient heart, as old as mankind’s desire for illusion, as well as the taste for mystification and its convenience. Thus, realism appears in our mind in childhood, when we wonder whether things around us are real or whether we are dreaming, and it is developed in the tales through which we hope to change the world. *Per se*, realism is merely a variant of solipsism: that is, of the idea that the external world does not exist, that it is a mere representation, perhaps even at our disposal. At first it seems like a moment of great liberation: the weight of the real is lifted and we can be the makers of our own world. Nietzsche saw in it the most beautiful liberation, the “bacchanal of free spirits,” but it is hard to agree. If there is no external world, if there is no difference between reality and representation, then the prevailing mood will be melancholy or rather what we could define as a bipolar

syndrome oscillating between a sense of omnipotence and the feeling of the pointlessness of everything. In the end, one feels lonely. The outside world does not exist; we are simply dreaming our dream or even someone else's dream: a programmed and almost expired one. In the eighteenth century, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid explained this with calm irony. If everything is a representation, then "the whole universe about me, bodies and spirits, sun, moon, stars, and earth, friends and relations, all things without exception, which I imagined to have a permanent existence, whether I thought of them or not, vanish at once."<sup>37</sup> And then the dream turns into a nightmare, like in *The Truman Show*.

What to do? Postmodernists have not been blind to the Golem they created—or at least philosophically sanctioned—precisely because, at the origin of their stance, there was a sincere emancipative desire and not a project of domination and mystification. But most of the time they adopted Wagner's strategy that "only the weapon that cast the wound can heal the wound"<sup>38</sup>—a sentence that is almost as risky as Hölderlin's "where danger grows, so does that which saves." Which is after all (let us note this) the fundamental principle of magical thought, according to which like cures like. Upon closer examination, and notwithstanding its insistence on irony and disillusion, postmodernism turns out to be a magical antirealism: a doctrine attributing to the spirit an uncontested dominion over the world. It is against this spirit that, with the turn of the century, realism came to the fore. It was a matter of relegitimizing—in philosophy, politics, and everyday life—a notion that, at the peak of postmodernism, was considered a philosophical naïveté as well as the manifestation of political conservatism, given that the appeal to reality, in ages still tied to the fatal slogan "all power to the imagination," seemed like the wish for nothing to change and the acceptance of

the world for what it is. Thirty years of history taught us the opposite.

As I mentioned in the prologue, what I call “new realism” is therefore the common name of a transformation that hit contemporary philosophical culture and that was developed in many directions. First of all, the end of the linguistic turn and the stronger realist inclination of philosophers that, while not adhering to postmodernist positions, had previously been more sensitive to the reasons of constructivism and the modeling role of conceptual schemes upon experience. Think of Hilary Putnam’s passage from “internal realism” to “commonsense realism,”<sup>39</sup> or of the claim of the importance of experience with respect to conceptual schemes in Umberto Eco,<sup>40</sup> or again of the development of a “speculative realism” by the younger generations of philosophers.<sup>41</sup> Another way in which the turn took place is the return to perception, which was traditionally neglected by philosophical transcendentalism culminating in postmodernism. Typically, the fact that aesthetics returned to be considered not as a philosophy of illusion but as a philosophy of perception<sup>42</sup> revealed a new openness toward the external world, namely, a real that lies beyond conceptual schemes and that is independent from them—just as it is impossible for us to correct optical illusions or change the color of the objects surrounding us by mere reflection. A third significant element of the realistic transformation is what I would call the ontological turn, namely, the fact that both in analytic and in continental philosophy there has been an increasing recovery of ontology as the science of being<sup>43</sup> and of the multiplicity of objects, which—from perception to society—constitute a research area that is not necessarily subordinated to natural science. With the return of ontology, therefore, there is the overcoming of the prevailing philosophical attitude ever since Kant, who had bid ontology farewell by claiming that philosophy had to cease dealing with

objects (now pertinent to science) and give up the “proud name of an ontology” so as to merely investigate—under “the modest title of analytic of the pure understanding”<sup>44</sup>—the conditions of possibility of knowing these objects (namely, it had to set itself in favor of or against science).

Thus, this is the roughly sketched portrait of contemporary philosophy, which seems profoundly changed with respect to the situation we still found at the end of the last century. Nevertheless, as I anticipated in the prologue, what I will propose in the next three chapters is my personal conception of realism as I developed it in the past twenty years. I sum it up in three key words—Ontology, Criticism, Enlightenment—which react to the respective fallacies of postmodernism: the fallacy of being-knowledge, the fallacy of ascertainment-acceptance, and the fallacy of knowledge-power.

*Ontology* simply means: the world has its laws and imposes them, namely, it is not the docile colony on which to exercise the constructive action of conceptual schemes. The mistake made here by postmodern thinkers was due to the fallacy of being-knowledge, that is, the confusion between ontology and epistemology: between what there is and what we know about what there is. It is clear that in order to *know* that water is H<sub>2</sub>O I need language, schemes, and categories. But that water *is* H<sub>2</sub>O is utterly independent from any knowledge of mine—so much so that water was H<sub>2</sub>O even before the birth of chemistry, and it would still be if we all disappeared from the earth. Mostly, as regards nonscientific experience, water wets and fire burns whether I know it or not, independently from languages, schemes, and categories. At a certain point, something resists us. It is what I call “unamendability”: the salient character of the real. This can certainly be a limitation but, at the same time, provides us with the support that allows us to distinguish dreams from reality and science from

magic. This is why I entitled the chapter dedicated to ontology “Realism.”

*Criticism*, then, means this. With what I define as the “fallacy of ascertainment-acceptance,” postmodernists assumed that ascertaining reality consists in accepting the existing state of affairs and that, inversely (although with a logical gap), irrealism is emancipative *per se*. Yet, it is clearly not so. Realism is the premise of criticism, while irrealism is at one with acquiescence, the tale we tell children so they fall asleep. Baudelaire noted that a dandy could have only spoken to the crowd in order to mock it.<sup>45</sup> Let alone an irrealist, incapable, for his own theories, of establishing whether he is *really* transforming himself and the world or whether, vice versa, he is simply imagining or dreaming about doing something of that kind. The realist, instead, has the possibility to criticize (if she wants to) and transform (if she can) by the virtue of the same banal reason why the diagnosis is the premise of therapy. And given that any deconstruction that is an end to itself is irresponsibility, I decided to entitle the third chapter “Reconstruction.”

Finally, let us come to *Enlightenment*. Recent history confirmed Habermas’s diagnosis that, thirty years ago, saw postmodernism as an anti-Enlightenment groundswell,<sup>46</sup> which finds its legitimacy in what I define “fallacy of knowledge-power,” according to which behind any form of knowledge there hides a power experienced as negative. As a consequence, instead of mainly linking itself to emancipation, knowledge becomes an instrument of enslavement. This anti-Enlightenment is the heart of darkness of modernity: namely, the rejection of the idea of progress and of the trust in the link between knowledge and emancipation in great thinkers such as de Maistre, Donoso Cortés, Nietzsche, which is summarized in Baudelaire’s idea that “Throne and altar” is a revolutionary maxim.<sup>47</sup> It is they that the postmodernism-populism time lapse seems to have proven right. Now, in order to exit this deep obscurity and to