BETWEEN “NEW REALISM” AND “WEAK THOUGHT”:
UMBERTO ECO’S “NEGATIVE REALISM” AND THE DISCOURSE OF
LATE POSTMODERN *IMPEGNO*

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Summary: The recent theory of a return of realism has sparked a lively and somewhat heated debate among contemporary Italian thinkers, generating a split between the supporters of the philosophy of weak thought, and those who argue for an overcoming of postmodernism and the development of a new philosophy of realism. This article explores Umberto Eco’s contribution to this debate, focusing both on Eco’s theory of “negative realism” and on his latest historiographic metafiction. I argue that while Eco’s recent theory further distances the author from the philosophy of weak thought, it does not call, as does Maurizio Ferraris’s philosophy of new realism, for an overcoming of postmodernism. Instead, following the outward shift that is typical of late postmodern *impegno*, Eco’s later work creates a critical idiom that more clearly uses postmodernist self-awareness as a strategy to promote self-empowerment and social emancipation.

This article explores Umberto Eco’s contribution to the current debate on the return of realism in order to shed light on the author’s position in the dispute between *realisti*—the supporters of the so-called philosophy of new realism—such as Maurizio Ferraris, and *debolisti*—the supporters of the postmodern philosophy of weak thought—such as Gianni Vattimo. My goal is to show that, while Eco’s recent theory of “negative realism” further distances the author from the philosophy of weak thought, it does not argue, as does Ferraris’s philosophy of new realism, for an overcoming of postmodernism. Instead, following the outward shift that is typical of late postmodern *impegno*, Eco’s later work creates a critical idiom that more clearly uses postmodernist self-awareness as a strategy to promote self-empowerment and social emancipation. Responding to today’s increasing demand for artistic commitment, Eco’s recent work combines anti-foundationalism with an ethical agenda that is more overtly grounded in empirical experience and makes the author’s message more openly political. Nonetheless, it does not trade the reader-oriented ethics of postmodernism for an author-centric one, which would prompt the return of a hegemonic, or “organic,” discourse of artistic

commitment. In Eco's later work, the postmodernist suspicion of cultural discourses is used as a cognitive strategy to reshape the collective imaginary and to invite the community to emerge from the current state of cultural *impasse*. Eco combines postmodernist disenchantment with a non-utopian "aesthetic of trust," one that recognizes the inability of art to impose meta-physical universals but, nonetheless, shows increased confidence in its capacity to inspire collective resistance by promoting active interpretation and the development of critical awareness.

Weak Thought and New Realism: Two Different Modes of Contemporary Italian *Impegno*

The recent theory of a return of realism has sparked a lively and somewhat heated debate among contemporary Italian thinkers, generating a split between two strands of ethical thought. On the one hand, there are the so-called *debolisti*, the supporters of the postmodernist philosophy of weak thought, on the other the *realisti*, those who argue for an overcoming of postmodernism and the development of a new philosophy of realism. One of the main supporters of the philosophy of new realism, Maurizio Ferraris, has recently published a book, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, that, as its title suggests, aspires to be a sort of manifesto of the return to reality and ethics that, according to some, characterizes recent Italian thought. Criticizing the philosophy of weak thought, to which he had originally contributed, Ferraris claims that the so-called linguistic turn of philosophy and the humanities, with the foregrounding of theory over experience, has not produced social emancipation as postmodernist philosophers had first anticipated.¹ On the contrary, postmodernist anti-foundationalism, and its defense of interpretative freedom over objective truth, has become a tool to impose the right of the strongest through the advent of a phenomenon such as media-based populism, namely the exploitation of communication systems to construct and legitimate new forms of truth that correspond to the logic of those in power. According to Ferraris, postmodernism promoted the shift from realism to "realitism," thus facilitating the creation of today's society of the spectacle. Its liberal approach to interpretation is responsible for turning the world into a fairytale whose meaning can be

¹ See also Maurizio Ferraris's article "Il ritorno al pensiero forte," as well as his introduction to the section on new realism published in *Alfabeta*2, and the exchange between Ferraris and Vattimo, "L'addio al pensiero debole che divide i filosofi".

continuously renegotiated and exploited by those in power in order to produce consensus. Overcoming postmodernism, Ferraris contends, today's philosophy should rehabilitate the notion of objective truth by subordinating hermeneutics to ontology. If philosophy renews its belief in the existence of a natural world that precedes conceptual schematization and that resists theoretical construction—a world, however, unlike that of scientific positivism, because it acts according to the principle of common sense and not according to natural laws—² then it will manage to come out of the postmodernist *impasse* and will reestablish hope in the human ability to tell right from wrong. Belief in the existence of an “unemendable” world, one that is not subject to wills and conjectures, can help philosophy to rehabilitate the concept of morality and regain trust in the possibility of promoting justice since “it is impossible to think that moral behavior can exist in a world without facts and objects” (*Manifesto* 63). Furthermore, Ferraris contends, a renewed belief in the value of facts and object can also enable philosophy to define somewhat objectively, and thus, to transform the social world, which, unlike the natural world, is subject to interpretation. New realism believes in the “rule of documentality,” it considers the inscription and recording of social acts as evidence that can greatly enhance the possibility of establishing the truth and promoting social justice (76–86). In Ferraris's opinion, philosophers can fulfill the Marxist task of fostering social emancipation and, thus, restore philosophy to a central role in society only if they reacquire the Kantian faith in the possibility of telling reality from fantasy.³ This faith, however, can be regained only by recognizing that the world exists outside and independently of social and mental constructions, and that it provides us both with the tools to distinguish between true and false and with the certainty that we can do so. In other words, Ferraris contends, philosophy can have a positive impact on society only if it reconciles the world of theoretical speculation with the external

² Ferraris claims that new realism does not reaffirm the principles of positivism. It perceives the external world as a type of “living according to nature” that can be explained with a statement such as “don't throw yourselves out of the plane without a parachute because you do not have wings,” rather than with a statement such as “the heterosexual family is a product of nature and thus is the base of society” (*Manifesto* 64–65). All translations from Ferraris's work are my own.

³ According to Ferraris, postmodernism misinterprets, or rather, radicalizes Kant's philosophy by rejecting ontology, and the transcendental category of the *noumenon*—the “thing-in-itself”—in favor of epistemology and subjective interpretation. New realism, instead, rehabilitates ontology and uses it as a way to support and give credibility to philosophical speculation (*Manifesto* 38).

world, thus acting as “a bridge between the world of common sense, of moral values, of opinions, and the world of knowledge in general” (59).

Postmodernism maintains that justice can be achieved only by subordinating the search for objective truth to the quest for consensus and the fostering of social solidarity.⁴ Ferraris, however, contends that this type of politics was only able to produce a new form of domination through the creation of a hegemonic type of populism. Thus, new realism constructs its ethical project on the recovery of ontology, critique and enlightenment. Reasserting the primacy of ontology, or “what is there,” over epistemology, or “what we know about the world,” new realism finds a foothold in the external world that makes it possible to distinguish dreams from reality. In this way, new realism enables philosophy to exchange postmodernist relativism and acquiescence for a rational critique, one that can give true answers as opposed to mere interpretations. Unlike the postmodernists, realist philosophers can support their theories with facts, they can prove that they are really transforming the world rather than simply imagining that they do so. Finally, new realism reasserts the emancipatory potential of Enlightenment thought by trading the nihilist notion that truth is power for the renewed belief in the human ability to establish the truth and to achieve human progress. In other words, new realism, as Ferraris contends, replaces the lesson of the early Foucault from *Truth and Power*, with that of the later Foucault from *The Courage of Truth*.⁵

Responding to Ferraris’s accusations, two of the main philosophers of

⁴ Richard Rorty argues that postmodernism carries an ethical message through a project of social “solidarity” “constructed out of little pieces,” which allows people to make personal connections with those who suffer, rather than simply accepting metaphysical universals—such as liberty, equality and dignity—as they are imposed from above (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* 94). On the other hand, Vattimo’s notion of solidarity, or, rather, of “charitable consensus” as he defines it, is based on the principle of Christian *caritas*. According to Vattimo, the concept of absolute truth must be replaced by the search for agreement and understanding, a search inspired by our love for our neighbor and the need to live in harmony with her/him (Vattimo, *Della realtà* 103, 136-137; *A Farewell to Truth* 36).

⁵ Ferraris argues that, in *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault distances himself from Nietzsche because he comes to the conclusion that the notion that truth is power should not lead to the dissolution of the category of truth and the fabling of reality. According to Ferraris, the later Foucault argues that instead of surrendering to a cynical pessimism, philosophers should formulate a new concept of truth based not on scientific or prophetic knowledge, but on the value of personal testimony (*Manifesto*, 106-111).

weak thought, Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, have argued that the recent attack on weak thought is based on the mistaken overlapping of postmodernity and postmodernism. Indeed, the postmodernist project to emancipate society by strong thought—a project that Vattimo had initially thought achievable through the multiplication of the systems of communication—⁶ has not been put into practice; the world continues to be ruled by the tyranny of objective truths in spite of the postmodernist attempt to create a culture of suspicion by exposing the ideological constructedness of social discourses.⁷ Nonetheless, while weak thought has not been put into practice, it remains very useful and very “current,” because it offers a valuable set of tools for the oppressed to empower themselves (Rovatti, *Inattualità* 22, 30-31). Weak thought, Vattimo claims, does not do away with realism, it only supports “a secondary form of ‘realism’” where Being—and, thus, reality—is no longer a metaphysical object but an historical event in which communities take part and which they contribute to shape and reshape through a process of negotiation and charitable consensus (Vattimo, *Della realtà* 10-18, 103-109). While truth is no longer an objective category, the difference between true and false can still be established based on the difference between the interpretations that are more widely accepted and shared by the community and those that are less so (Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* 35-36).⁸ Thus, as Rovatti contends, weak thought is a form of “positive thought” because it rescues the oppressed from the violence of objective and distorted truths by making them “intellectuals of themselves,” by rescuing them from their subjection to power and encouraging them to pursue the path of active interpretation and democratic participation (Rovatti, *Inattualità* 30-33). Unlike new realism,

⁶ As Vattimo himself has claimed, his initial optimism in the emancipatory power of the media has substantially diminished since the first edition of *The Transparent Society*. In the current world, media “unreality” has become another vehicle to promote strong, hegemonic truths. This is why the second edition of *The Transparent Society* includes a chapter on the “limits of de-realization” (*La società trasparente* 3-4, 101-121).

⁷ Vattimo’s response to Ferraris can be found in “L’addio al pensiero debole che divide i filosofi.” Rovatti’s, instead, can be found in *Inattualità del pensiero debole*, which also includes his newspaper articles on the same topic.

⁸ According to Vattimo, Kant himself argues that, ultimately, we can know reality only through *phenomena* and our own human *a priori* categories. This, however, is enough to distinguish between reality and fantasy since, as a community, we can still tell which interpretations are more acceptable than others (Vattimo, *Della realtà* 103-105).

weak thought claims that the world cannot be interpreted objectively without generating authoritarian meanings that, instead of releasing individuals from their subjection to power, can become an additional source of social oppression. According to *debolisti*, the current cultural *impasse* is due to the lack of a critical attitude towards reality, which prevents people from making any distinction among the multitudes of messages they receive. Thus, Rovatti contends, realists like Ferraris who claim that experience and common sense is all that is needed to establish the truth, do not provide people with the necessary cognitive tools to resist domination and to avoid falling victims to the *status quo* (*Inattualità* 11-12). Following the lesson of the early Foucault, the philosophers of weak thought continue to believe that the only way to help the oppressed is to promote the awareness that truth is power (*Inattualità* 12, 33-48). This awareness invites individuals to question “single thought,” without being subjected to the violent imposition of alternative grand solutions that prevent them from coming to their own conclusions and developing their own interpretations. As Rovatti and Vattimo have claimed, even though weak thought does not offer a ready-made political ontology, it does not call for resignation and acquiescence. Its goal is to transform society by prompting individuals themselves to engage in active ways of thinking that, in turn, will compel them to establish bonds of solidarity with those who share their struggles, thereby generating concrete acts of social change.⁹ Thus, unlike new realism, weak thought continues to foreground social solidarity over the quest for objectivity. As Vattimo argues, factual knowledge, such as the one that can be gained through historical research, is very important in exposing social injustice and uncovering the repressed voices of the Subaltern. Yet, ultimately, the oppressed can be helped only through the construction of a social and political practice based on broad participation and democratic agreement (Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* 13). Stressing the important role that hermeneutic philosophy can play in meeting today’s social needs, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala have recently attempted to lay out in more concrete terms the type of political praxis envisioned by weak

⁹ In his conversation with Ferraris, Vattimo argues that weak thought can be found among the “networks of friends [*compagni*] [...] with whom one can share projects and ideals,” and, thus, “anywhere there is resistance: the no-Tav movement, the Gaza fleet, the anti-Marchionne unions” (Ferraris and Vattimo, “L’addio al pensiero debole che divide i filosofi”). The translation is my own. Similarly to Vattimo, Rovatti claims that weak thought seeks to foster “active forms of solidarity” such as the ones that naturally develop in the community among people who share similar struggles (Rovatti, *Inattualità* 31-32).

thought. Weak thought, they contend, is an important instrument for "the weak in search of alternatives," because it provides a way to put into practice the Marxist project of social emancipation without appealing to violence and oppression (Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism* 2-3). Replacing revolution with the principle of democratic participation, and "the interplay of minority and majority" (79), "hermeneutic communism" can construct "within the framework of the formal rules of democracy" (121), a public realm with communist access to power, one where "individuals coexist freely while protecting the private space required for their personal development" and their "active interpretations" (77). According to Vattimo and Zabala, a political practice based on violent engagement promotes passive acceptance and often leads to repression, as the Russian and Chinese communist models have shown. The creation, instead, of a democratically elected government that defends the interests of the weakest parts of the population against local and global exploitation, may be a viable alternative for communism in today's world. Thus, a "weak" form of communism may be more effective than the type of radical thought theorized by thinkers such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in challenging the oppressive practices of the global empire.¹⁰ As Hardt and Negri suggest, anti-globalization movements, and the networks of interactive cooperation they create among a multitude of singularities, are a fundamental hope for the future. Yet, Vattimo contends, in order to become effective, these movements must gain a political voice through democratic elections. In other words, they must reach some degree of institutionalization or they risk being marginalized.¹¹

Umberto Eco has been called upon by Ferraris to take part in the current debate between the strong and the weak line of Italian ethical thought. While he disagrees with Ferraris's claim that contemporary realism is something entirely "new," Eco has, in fact, contributed to the recent discussion of realism with an essay entitled "Ci sono delle cose che non si possono dire. Di un realismo negativo."¹² According to Ferraris, as far back

¹⁰ On radical thought in today's Italy see Hardt and Negri's *Empire* and the collection edited by Virno and Hardt, *Radical Thought in Italy*. Vattimo and Zabala view South American Bolivarianism as an example of their theory of hermeneutic communism. They claim that Bolivarianism is a democratically elected form of communist government that promotes social solidarity both locally, by helping the indigenous populations, and also across nations, by creating networks among the "poor" countries that attempt to resist global exploitation (*Hermeneutic Communism* 121-140).

¹¹ On this topic see Zabala (*Weakening Philosophy* 31-32).

as the 90's, Eco anticipated the current wave of realism with the theory that he formulated in *The Limits of Interpretation* and later developed in *Kant and the Platypus* (Ferraris, *Manifesto* 28). In *Kant*, Eco argues that, in order to prevent hermeneutics from developing into pure relativism, philosophy must acknowledge that there exists a "hard core of reality" which precedes and resists some interpretations. As Ferraris argues, because of Eco's rehabilitation of experience and common sense within and above the realm of philosophy, his theory of "negative realism" shares a certain similarity with Ferraris's own branch of "minimalistic and modern realism according to which ontology works by opposition, as a limit" to philosophical speculation (*Manifesto* 64). Ultimately, however, Eco's stance in the recent struggle between *realisti* and *debolisti* is not as unambiguous as Ferraris suggests, and does not point unproblematically towards a defense of realism and a dismissal of weak thought. An initial supporter of the philosophy of weak thought, Eco later distanced himself from Vattimo's position arguing that he himself is more of a realist than Vattimo and that his theory of interpretation gives more stability to Being and, thus, poses stronger limitations to the hermeneutical drift.¹³ Yet, even though, as Eco suggests, his referential vocation may be stronger than Vattimo's, what he has described as his "*modestissimo Realismo Negativo*" also moves away from Ferraris's theory of new realism ("Ci sono delle cose" 25). Unlike Ferraris, Eco does not altogether dismiss the notion that anti-foundational thought can be a strong tool for social emancipation. Instead, as I will show, he suggests that, combined with a higher degree of realism, weak thought can become "the thought of the weak in search of alternatives." In his later work, Eco shows more clearly how postmodernist self-awareness can be used as a means to promote social self-empowerment and respond to the demands of a world, like today's, where the number of the oppressed continues to increase. Like other postmodernist authors, Eco has developed a style that transforms the cognitive strategy of postmodernism into performative knowledge by taking a less skeptical approach to ontological doubt.¹⁴ Thus, as I will show, by combining postmodernist anti-foundationalism with a more overt ref-

¹² In his latest essay, Eco summarizes and develops the argument that he had presented in *Kant and the Platypus*.

¹³ This view is expressed in Eco's *Kant and the Platypus* as well as in the essays "A Response by Eco," "Weak Thought and the Limits of Interpretation," and "Ci sono delle cose che non si possono dire."

¹⁴ I am using the definition of late postmodernism that Monica Jansen applies to writers such as Tabucchi, Baricco and Ammaniti. In addition to challenging the notion of an overcoming of postmodernism, Jansen also claims that the new

erential and political agenda, Eco's later work creates an ethics of writing that should be aligned with the practice of what has been defined as late postmodern *impegno*.¹⁵ In late postmodernism, suspicion towards cultural discourses becomes a viable political weapon for intervention in today's world because it is combined with a renewed sense of trust in art's ability to promote social change by indicating the path that leads to the acquisition of possible truths, yet without imposing it. In Eco's case, the path to acquiring possible answers is the cognitive path that leads to the awareness of the limits of interpretation, a path that prompts readers to dismiss distorted interpretations of reality that have caused and continue to cause social oppression, "the things that cannot be said." Art may be unable to promote a utopian project of liberation by telling people how things really are or should be, but nonetheless it can foster community building by creating strong bonds among individuals who practice critical interpretation as a means of resistance.

The Double Bind of Eco's "Negative Realism"

As Eco has claimed, he has been asked to participate in the recent debate on new realism because of a theory that he has continued to develop since the 60's ("Ci sono delle cose" 23-25). The author's theory of negative realism does not mark a major turning point in his thought. It should be viewed, rather, as a recent development of the moderate line of deconstructionist thought that the author began to develop with his theory of interpretation based on the principle of "unlimited semiosis," and his theory of semiotics based on the absence of absolute structures and on the organization of knowledge into a rhizome-shaped encyclopedia where semantics is combined with pragmatics.¹⁶ As Eco argues, his early work is crucial to under-

wave of Italian realism known as "New Italian Epic" is itself a form of late postmodernist *impegno* and, thus, does not mark a shift from postmodernism to ethics (Jansen, "The Epics of Reality" 77-92).

¹⁵ The theory of late postmodern *impegno* has been developed by critics such as Jennifer Burns (*Fragments of Impegno* and "Re-thinking *impegno*"), Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug (see the introduction to their edited collection *Postmodern Impegno*), and Monica Jansen ("The Epics of Reality").

¹⁶ Among the works where Eco first developed his theories of interpretation and semiotics see *The Open Work* (1989 [1962]), *La struttura assente* (1968), *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976 [1975]) and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1986 [1984]).

standing a theory of realism, such as his current one, which challenges the notion that the mind can reach objective knowledge of the world by “*adaequatio rei et intellectus*,” and which supports, instead, the theory that the world, in “the way we represent it to ourselves is definitely the result of an interpretation,” and, thus, we can never “assume that our answers, even when they seem all in all ‘good,’ must be taken as definitive” (“Ci sono delle cose” 24-25).¹⁷ Eco’s theory of the role of the reader is also crucial to understanding his philosophy, because it already highlights the differences that would separate Eco’s path from those of other deconstructionist thinkers and that would eventually lead to the formulation of his present theory of negative realism. With his theory of the “model reader” as a structural strategy internal to every text, Eco poses limitations on hermeneutic freedom (*The Role of the Reader*, 7-11). Model readers, Eco argues, interpret the text by making reasonable choices rather than coming to a private reading and, even then, they are free only to choose among the different paths of “good” reading pre-established by the text. If there can be no objective truth, and thus, no definitive interpretation of a text, one can still distinguish good from bad interpretations through a process of negotiation based on freedom and fidelity.

When the postmodernist debate first developed in Italy, Eco published two essays that highlight some of the similarities between his philosophy of interpretation and the Italian line of postmodernist thought, the philosophy of weak thought. In his essay “On the Crisis of the Crisis of Reason,” Eco basically supports Rovatti’s and Vattimo’s claim that postmodernist thought should create a new concept of rationality rather than negating reason and metaphysics altogether.¹⁸ The goal of postmodernist thought, Eco claims, “is not to kill reason, but to render bad reasons harmless, and to dissociate the notion of reason from that of truth” (“On the Crisis” 126). This position is reasserted also in “L’antiporfirio,” the essay which Eco contributed to the book-length manifesto on weak thought. Here, Eco suggests that his semantic system based on the structure of the Deleuzian rhizome falls into the category of weak thought because, while it undermines the possibility of a global model of rationality, it provides provisional rules of reasonability that give precarious order to a chaotic world devoid of ultimate meaning: “The encyclopedia does not provide a global model

¹⁷ All translations from Eco’s essay “Ci sono delle cose che non si possono dire” are my own.

¹⁸ “‘Weak thought’ [...] marks a path, indicates a direction of the route. It is a way that parts from all forms of hegemonic rationality, however reinterpreted or masked, although, as we all know, a definitive farewell from rationality is impossible” (Rovatti and Vattimo, *Il pensiero debole* 19). The translation is my own.

of *rationality* [...] but rules of *reasonability*, i.e. rules to figure out at every step, the conditions that allow us to use language to explain—according to some temporary ordering criteria—a disordered world” (“L’antiporfirio” 75). Like the supporters of weak thought, Eco believes that, in the era of the collapse of ideologies meaning is still possible, but only insofar as one argues for a weakening of ontology rather than advocating for a defeat of metaphysics. Old structuring systems are still capable of giving minor directions and, thus, of constructing “good,” yet revisable paradigms of knowledge, if they are deprived of monolithic and biased perspectives and endowed with the new meanings that a “community” accepts after a process of negotiation. According to Eco, this is the correct interpretation of Pierce’s notion of “unlimited semiosis,” a theory that, like his own, poses social limitations to interpretive freedom and, thus, distances the author from more extreme forms of post-structuralism (*Interpretation and Overinterpretation* 144-145; “A response” 195). Yet, this notion of the limits of interpretation is something that Eco’s reader shares with Vattimo’s hermeneutic philosopher: instead of turning history into a set of dusty spectacles or empty *simulacra*, they both respect the meaning of the world left to us in legacy.

As has been argued, the peculiarity of weak thought is that, unlike other types of deconstructionist philosophies, it resists falling into the traps of relativism as it seeks a solution to the problems of the limits of interpretation.¹⁹ This solution combines a nihilist program of ironic re-thinking based on Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s thought, with an attitude of *pietas* towards cultural monuments, an approach that, ultimately, subjects interpretation to the limitation of historical and social conditions.²⁰ As Vattimo has claimed, unlike pragmatism and deconstruction his “ethics of interpretation” relies on the “weak normative power” of a history emancipated from the dogma of metaphysics.²¹ Weak thought believes that, by engag-

¹⁹ On this topic see Rosso (“Postmodern Italy”), Borradori (“‘Weak Thought’ and Postmodernism”) and Di Martino (“From Pirandello’s Humor to Eco’s Double Coding”).

²⁰ Vattimo presents his theory of positive nihilism, or what he also calls his ontology of weakness in *The End of Modernity*.

²¹ Vattimo has criticized both French thought and American pragmatism for rejecting all historical meta-*récits* in favour of pure arbitrariness: “the monuments of the past carry in them what we would call a weak normative power, on the basis of which, [...] postmodern criticism can still have a meaning on the level of ‘critique’ [...]” (Vattimo, “Postmodern Criticism: Postmodern Critique” 64-5). On this topic, see also Vattimo, *Della realtà* 12, 16-17.

ing in a dialogue with tradition, communities can still find valid criteria by which they can orient themselves in a life devoid of strong values: “tradition, the message which in the experience of humanity is crystallized and speaks through language [...] points to specific choices, criteria of rationality, or, rather of reasonability” (Vattimo, *Al di là del soggetto* 26).²² Developing this theory, while linking it more closely to the formulation of a social and political praxis inspired by hermeneutic philosophy, Vattimo has recently claimed that, because of its attitude towards history, weak thought is a fundamental tool for democratic societies to distinguish between true and false without reverting to metaphysics and violating the principle of consensus (*Hermeneutic Communism*, 106-107). Weak thought draws on the past not merely to impose counter-truths but to foster the creation of a society based on dialogue and reciprocal comprehension. It recovers the silenced voices of the oppressed to prioritize “not objectivity as such but the rights of the many who suffered and still suffer and the very right of the community to remake itself into a place of shared civic life, of true political amity” (*A Farewell to Truth* 13). As can be inferred, Vattimo’s theory of social solidarity has striking similarities with the notion of “community” that Eco inherits from Pierce. Like Eco, Vattimo poses limitations to the hermeneutical drift by establishing that society must come to an informed understanding and a democratic agreement on the paths of “good,” yet revisable interpretations of reality and, thus, on the paradigms that must be designed in order to (re)build that society. In spite of the different theoretical paths upon which Eco and Vattimo construct their respective philosophies, they both contend that meaning is ultimately subjected to social limitations.

Nonetheless, when in *Kant and the Platypus* Eco attempts to clarify the role that reality and reference play within his theory of semiotics, he moves further away from what he will later define as Vattimo’s “*strong weak thought*” (Eco, “Weak Thought and the Limits” 42). At this point, Eco’s Peircean philosophy of conjecture and fallibilism becomes incompatible with Vattimo’s line of Nietzsche and Heidegger-inspired nihilism, and he creates a milder line of weak, or postmodernist, thought. According to Eco, Vattimo’s “ontology of actuality” based on a program of charitable consensus is not enough to avoid relativism and prevent Being from becoming pure “*flatus vocis*” (*Kant* 47). Thus, Eco opposes to Vattimo’s notion of a “moth-eaten being” his own theory of Being, which relies on the stability of a higher degree of realism: “even if being were moth-eaten, there would

²² The translation is my own.

always be a fabric whose warp and web, confused by the infinite holes that have eaten into it, still subsists in some stubborn ways" (*Kant* 54). In *Kant and the Platypus*, without dismissing the notion of "unlimited semiosis," Eco comes to the conclusion that "we are opposing to the limit of the *already given* the force of a *conjectural thought*," namely that the "hard core" of Being precedes semiosis and poses limitations even to the interpretations that can be negotiated by a community ("Weak Thought and the Limits" 55-56). In other words, Being indicates which of the paradigms created through a social exchange based both on knowledge of the already said and on mutual understanding, are not acceptable: "The world as we represent it to ourselves is an effect of interpretation," but "what new rule should the Community prefer, what others condemn as folly?" (*Kant* 48-49); "To say that meaning is negotiated does not mean that the contract springs from nothing" (273). In *Kant and the Platypus*, Eco comes to the conclusion that researchers must accept "the ghost of ontological reference" (309), thus formulating a theory of semiosis based on "contractual realism," that is, on the contract between cultural interpretation and the limitations posed by the "continuum" of experience, the "grain that binds our cognitive types" (5, 274). This philosophy inspires Eco's latest theory of "negative realism" and separates him from Vattimo's strand of postmodernist thinking, which, as Eco contends, runs into the limits of excessive nihilism by subjecting Being to the same process of weakening as it does thought: "If Vattimo said that his 'weakness' is a metaphor for the assumption that every knowledge cannot be but conjectural, then (at least on this point) we can agree" ("Weak Thought and the Limits" 56). Yet, while Eco's hermeneutical program has a stronger, or at least a more overtly referential vocation than Vattimo's, his theory of realism seems to be more "modest" than that of philosophers such as Ferraris. Ultimately, unlike Ferraris, Eco does not resolve the double bind between experience and interpretation, between the search for objectivity and the quest for social solidarity, by dismissing the latter terms in favor of a top-down ethics of interpretation. When Ferraris claims that experience holds the key to achieve truth and justice, he has a specific type of intellectual in mind, a Socratic truth-teller, and, thus, a "parrhesiastes" similar to the one described by the later Foucault (Ferraris, *Manifesto* 109-111). Intellectuals, Ferraris contends, should dare to speak *their* truths if they want people to reject the notion that "anything goes". Using their "personal testimony," namely their knowledge of reality achieved through experience and research, intellectuals should build a counter-discourse that rises above distorted metanarratives and reestablishes the truth. Here Ferraris's description of the philosopher is very similar to the description of

the writer of new epics provided by Wu Ming in their memorandum on recent socially engaged literature, *New Italian Epic*. Drawing extensively on non-fictional materials, such as archive-based research, or an author's own real life experience, as in the case of Saviano's *Gomorra*, writers of "New Italian Epic" make a stronger claim to authenticity and attempt to create alternative truths that can have a mythopoetic impact on the community. Eco, on the other hand, suggests that, instead of acting as truth-tellers, contemporary intellectuals should acknowledge that they may never be able to tell for sure "*what is the case*," while at the same time renewing their trust in their ability to foster change by promoting awareness of the distorted views of reality that influence our understanding of the world. The hard core of reality, Eco claims, is not a "kernel" that philosophy can lay bare; the only truth that one can gain from it is the awareness of the "limit," the understanding that "there are moments in which the world, faced with our interpretations, tells us NO," and, thus, "there are things that cannot be said" ("Ci sono delle cose" 25).

Ultimately, in spite of Eco's renewed trust in the intellectual's ability to reshape society, his latest view on ethical intervention is not so dissimilar from the one he had theorized in his earlier distinction between "apocalyptic" and "integrated" intellectuals, the former being those who rise above culture by conveying alternative metaphysical perspectives, and the latter—the model of intellectual Eco embodies—being those who criticize culture from within, through the "guerrilla warfare" of a continuous critique of the passive reception of cultural messages that prompts the audience to discriminate between good and bad interpretations.²³ Hence, instead of being associated with the philosophy of new realism, Eco's later practice should be aligned, rather, with the politics and poetics of late postmodern *impegno* as has been described by critics such as Burns, Antonello and Mussgnug, and Jansen. Inspired by the climate of cultural degradation that Italy has experienced since the 90's, late postmodern *impegno* overcomes excessive openness and disenchantment without trading the reader-oriented ethics of postmodernism for an author-centric politics. By redefining the balance between reality and theory, truth and fiction, the later Eco does not leave the politics of interpretative pluralism and the poetics of metafiction entirely behind. Rather, he uses the emancipatory power of postmodernist self-awareness to respond to today's increased

²³ While the famous definition of "apocalittici" and "integrati" comes from Eco's *Apocalypse Postponed*, the theory of a "guerrilla warfare" internal to culture can be found in "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare."

demand for an art that can foster social self-empowerment by rescuing people from their passive subjection to virtual views of reality that favor the right of the strongest. As Burns argues, Antonio Tabucchi provides a fitting description of the late postmodernist intellectual when, in *Il gioco dell'oca*, he compares himself to Pasolini, thus highlighting both the similarities and the differences between the politics of the organic and of the post-organic intellectual (“Re-thinking *Impegno*” 64-71). This description can be applied also to the later Eco, whose politics seems to be moving in a direction that is not dissimilar from that of the later Tabucchi, in spite of the fundamental differences that continue to divide the two authors²⁴:

I don't know if I know [...]. It is forbidden to know it all. However, we can at least know enough parts of the whole to be able to gain a better understanding of it, if we manage to connect the pieces and put together the fragments of the events that are happening and that are reported to us only in dischronic, illogical, palindromic way. (Tabucchi, *L'oca al passo* 8)

Like Pasolini, Burns contends, late postmodernist writers put their knowledge and critical understanding of reality at the service of the community. Yet, they also acknowledge the fallibility and the limitations of an author-centric position based on the imposition of universals. Such a position, as Antonello and Mussnug have argued by quoting Critchley, would not respect “the multiple singularities of the encounter with others that defines the experience of sociality” (*Postmodern Impegno* 11). Thus, late postmodernist writers create an interpretative gap that allows readers to engage with the author in a process of inquiry that may not lead to ultimate truths, but nonetheless will help them gain a better understanding of reality (Burns, “Re-thinking *Impegno*” 66-71). Ultimately, in spite of their differences,

²⁴ In *La gastrite di Platone*, Tabucchi criticizes Eco because of a statement that the author made regarding the writer's lack of authority to express holistic judgments on social events as they are taking place. Contrary to Eco, Tabucchi claims that writers should voice their opinions even if these are based only on conjectures, because, in doing so, they can foster a more thorough understanding of the present world. Yet, it should be noted that Tabucchi himself, as he states in *La gastrite*, believes that the writer's ultimate task is that of posing questions, “*mettere in crisi*,” and not that of answering them. In addition, Tabucchi concludes one of his last pieces of non-fiction, *L'oca al passo*, by renewing his pledge to literature, which, as he claims, he ultimately prefers to journalism as a medium to interpret life (Tabucchi, *La gastrite di Platone* 31-32; *L'oca al passo* 166-167). The translation from *L'oca al passo* is my own.

Eco's "*modestissimo Realismo Negativo*," may have more in common with Rovatti's and Vattimo's "*etica minima*," than with an "*etica massima*" such as that of Ferraris, because it believes that intellectuals should use their privileged access to experience and documentation and their critical insight into reality, not to impose the existence of new truths, but, rather, to help readers develop on their own the ability to discriminate among cultural messages, to "make a distinction between dream, poetic invention, acid trip [...] and acceptable claims on the things of the physical and historical world that surrounds us" (Eco, "Ci sono delle cose" 24).²⁵ This ethical project, which, ultimately, puts empirical knowledge at the service of social solidarity by favoring a politics of active interpretation and negotiation of meaning, is the mode of intervention of Eco's later fiction. Combining postmodernist anti-foundationalism with social realism, Eco has recently given a new sensibility to his historical fiction. His later novels expose the fictions of history not only to disenchant the audience, but also to inspire collective resistance and create a new sense of communal belonging based on the rejection of monolithic notions of cultural identity.

"Negative Realism" and the Poetics of Eco's Latest Historical Metafiction

In *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*, Amy Elias challenges once and for all the Marxist notion that postmodernist metafiction lacks a genuine historical sense, and argues, rather, that the historical novel should be viewed as a *continuum* from the Nineteenth Century until today. Elias takes even further Linda Hutcheon's defense of the realistic nature of "historiographic metafiction," a genre that she renames "metahistorical romance."²⁶ She claims that postmodernist historical fiction is affected by the changes in contemporary historiography and, thus, reflects the rejection of the totalizing concept of history deriving from the Enlightenment Rationalism—the linear notion of history as progress—that legitimized European nationalism and colonialism and that is also responsible for the traumas of the World Wars. The postmodernist ironic attitude towards the past does not turn history into a set of empty *simulacra*; instead, it echoes history's own emancipation from cultural master narratives and its suspicion of any new forms of authority. Nonetheless, in postmodernist fiction

²⁵ Rovatti describes the difference between new realism and weak thought as that between an "*etica massima*" and an "*etica minima*" (Rovatti, *Inattualità* 24, 30).

²⁶ See Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*.

the necessity to open history to new interpretations through a poetics of fabulatory realism is complemented by the search for non-foundational meanings. In fact, like contemporary historiography, postmodernist novels are informed by the ethical "desire" to make sense of the past while avoiding the dogmatic viewpoints of masters, despots and colonizers.²⁷ Elias's work focuses mostly on American postmodernist fiction. Nonetheless, critics such as Cristina Della Coletta, Margherita Ganeri and Ruth Glynn have invited us to expand a similar theory of historical fiction to include postmodernist Italian literature, thus prompting us to subvert the negative view of historiographic metafiction that has always been popular among Italian critics, and that is also often used to defend the recent theory of a return to realism.²⁸

In Italy, the postmodernist years, the eighties, are often viewed as the "*anni del riflusso*," a time of waning political enthusiasm caused by the failure of the social uprisings of the sixties and seventies. A widespread opinion among Italian critics is that these years coincide with the inward-shift of fiction, namely the development of a poetics of irony and self-referentiality, which marks the writers' withdrawal from reality and art's resignation to the *status quo* after the end of strong ideologies. Recently, however, some critics have challenged this view by arguing that the discourse of *impegno* should be viewed as a *continuum* from the writers of post World-

²⁷ Elias's definition of "sublime desire" is taken from Hayden White and it reflects the tendency of postmodernist historiography to come to terms with history while acknowledging its inability to ever grasp it ultimately without casting a violent gaze on the past, which would resemble that of the oppressor and is thus unacceptable.

²⁸ Both Della Coletta and Ganeri view the Italian historical novel as a *continuum* from the Nineteenth Century until today. Nonetheless, unlike Della Coletta, Ganeri argues that postmodernist novels, due to the ambiguity of their double coding, betray a partial waning of social commitment on the author's side (Della Coletta, *Plotting the Past*; Ganeri, *Il romanzo storico* and "The Double Bind of the Historical Novel"). On the other hand, Glynn links the postmodernist novel to the anti-monumental and anti-illusionist view of history that begins to impose itself in Italian literature with Pirandello. As the author contends, after Sciascia the historical novel produces two different modes of ethical writing, the first one relies on microhistory (the Consolo-Vassalli line), while the other uses the poetics of metafiction (the Eco-Malerba line) (Glynn, *Contesting the Monument*). Among the Italian critics who continue to view postmodernism as detached from ethics, and support the recent theory of a shift from postmodernism to realism see Wu Ming (*New Italian Epic*), Antonio Scurati (*La letteratura dell'inesperienza*), and Romano Luperini (*La fine del postmoderno*), among others.

War II Italy until today. Burns, for instance, argues that in the postmodernist years the discourse of *impegno* was not eroded, it only became fragmented as some writers, conditioned by the influence of post-structuralism, started taking into account more seriously the role of the reader as a co-constructor of the ethical message of literature (Burns, *Fragments of Impegno* 1-10). In other words, with postmodernism the discourse of artistic commitment becomes bidirectional, it constructs an ethics of interpretation that is no longer directed solely from author to reader in a top-down way. Applying a similar view of postmodernism to the theory of the Italian historical novel, Della Coletta and Glynn have challenged the view that postmodernist metafiction is marked by a poetics of nostalgia and a flight from reality that deprives history of the ability to counteract social fragmentation. As both critics contend, historiographic metafiction is inspired not only by the need to subvert grand narratives and reflect the “anthropological mutations” of the contemporary era, but also by the desire to find new interpretations of the past that can restore some meaning to the present without reasserting an hegemonic or illusionist view of history. This double bind is at the heart of Eco’s metafiction, where deconstruction is always combined with a desire for the plot, namely, the author’s desire to share possible paths of good interpretations with the community of readers. As Eco himself has claimed, he ironizes the past not to overcome it as an ontological category but to free it from monolithic perspectives and reactivate its ability to produce non-hegemonic meaning (Eco, *Postscript* 530). When William of Baskerville, the protagonist of *The Name of the Rose*, finds the culprit for the abbey’s crimes, he claims that he has mistakenly discovered a plot that does not exist since “there is no order in the universe” (*The Name* 491-492). Yet, William also understands that his role is “to make truth laugh” without negating it, and to appreciate the usefulness of reason and of old structuring systems by engaging in a process of rational thinking which has nevertheless abandoned the possibility of closure: “The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterwards you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless” (492). Likewise, in the novel’s conclusion, Adso’s pessimism about his ability to impose an ultimate interpretation on the fragments of the past reassembled in his manuscript is mitigated by the unspoken hope that “model” readers will reconstruct the message of his narrative. Adso, and, by extension, Eco, would not pass on their message in a bottle if they didn’t think that readers could negotiate the cognitive value of their version of history.

Foucault’s Pendulum presents a similar dualistic attitude to history. The novel attacks the fictionalized views of the past constructed after the col-

lapse of the political utopias of the sixties in an attempt to fill the Void. In the novel, this return of what Eco has defined elsewhere as "UR-Fascism" (*Five Moral Pieces* 65-88) is subverted and ironized by the protagonists' "Plan" to construct a history of the world through the random associations of false myths and conspiracy theories that have circulated throughout time. In spite of its pessimist outlook, however, the novel also suggests that some historical narratives can restore reality to a more authentic meaning. Towards the novel's conclusion, Casaubon finds out that minor *récits*, such as Belbo's biography, are "key texts" in the effort to redefine identity after the collapse of certainties. The decision of the adolescent Belbo to play the trumpet at a Partisan funeral changed the character's role in life from spectator to actor. Even though Belbo was too young to take part in the Resistance and, thus, did not have the opportunity to prove himself as a hero, he chose to stand with those who were on the right side of history. This fragment of deep meaning coming from the past is the weak yet meaningful truth on which to rebuild the present. Nonetheless, as Casaubon suggests, readers may be unwilling to abandon totalitarian "Plans" and to follow this path of "good" interpretation.

Eco's most recent metafiction foregrounds the ethical and referential vocation that has always characterized the author's work while sending a more optimistic message about art's ability to transform social reality through the recovery of memory. Dealing with the theme of amnesia, both *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana* and *The Prague Cemetery* engage their protagonist, a postmodernist "moth-eaten" subject, in a process of reconstruction of private memory that, ultimately, leads to the recovery of cultural memory because it unearths silenced texts of national history. Presented with an intertextual mix of authentic cultural documents, readers are invited to question the empiric data *together with* the protagonist and/or the narrator. The goal, in fact, is not to impose alternative objective truths, but to put readers on the path that leads to self-awareness, the awareness of the bad interpretations of the world to which the public imaginary falls victim and of the monolithic images of identity upon which the community has constructed its sense of Self throughout history. In his later work, Eco shows a stronger sense of trust in the power of memory to reshape the collective imaginary. Yet, as I have argued, in Eco's case we cannot speak merely of a return to realism or of the development of a new organic form of commitment. Instead, it would be more accurate to argue that the author's later work has undergone the ethical shift that has made

postmodernist fiction more overtly political, thus awakening its critical vocation to the needs of a world, that of today, where social degradation calls on art to take on a more active social role. For Eco, as for many contemporary writers, the desire to recollect the past has taken on a renewed sense of social urgency due to the politics of forgetting and cultural revisionism that informs current public discourse and that acts as a powerful instrument of social fragmentation and disempowerment.²⁹ The urgency to say “NO” that informs the author’s theory of negative realism is echoed by the writer’s necessity to reinforce his relationship with the reader and to turn it into a bond between members of a community that participate in the struggle for change by resisting the dominant cultural model. Eco’s later fiction recognizes that history is something that communities share and which can bind them together in new ways even though, ultimately, their dialogue with the past must remain open.³⁰ Thus, postmodernist disenchantment leads the way for a new hope in art’s ability to expose the fiction of the past while building a new sense of communal belonging on the rubble of history.

After a stroke, Yambo, the protagonist of *The Mysterious Flame of Queen Loana*, suffers from a peculiar type of amnesia; having lost his episodic memory he remembers everything he learned from books but nothing about his personal life.³¹ Thus, he moves to his childhood home in Solara in order to reconstruct his personal past. Here, Yambo attempts to recover his memory by going over the cultural texts—from books and newspapers to comic books and music—that constructed the imaginary of

²⁹ On cultural revisionism in contemporary Italy see Angelo Del Boca (*La storia negata*), Antonio Tabucchi (*L’oca al passo*) and Wu Ming (*New Italian Epic*), among others.

³⁰ I am referring to Elias’s description of the post-postmodern attitude towards history, which, as the critic suggests, can already be found in some metahistorical romances: “It may be time to (re)acknowledge history as something we universally share, something that as Jeanette Winterson has noted is ‘written on the body,’ even as we enter into experimental, ethical dialogue with it, in the full knowledge that that dialogue will remain unfinalized, deferred, filled with hints that guide a conversation which never ends. Which is, perhaps, what metahistorical romance is all about” (Elias, “Metahistorical Romance” 171).

³¹ The present reading of *The Mysterious Flame* revisits my previous interpretation of the novel (Di Martino, “From Pirandello’s Humor to Eco’s Double Coding” 152-153) while contextualizing it within the framework of Eco’s latest theory.

his generation during Fascist times. Most of the texts that he encounters are imbued with Fascist propaganda; some, however, like the comic books that survived the regime's censorship and were the protagonist's favorite reading as a child, go against the grain of Fascist ideology. Thanks to the empirical data that he collects, Yambo is successful in reconstructing the daily life of his generation. Yet, he is unable to find his own place in history until he has a second stroke, which is caused by the discovery of another important cultural monument, the First Folio of Shakespeare of 1623. The second stroke puts Yambo into a permanent comatose state that eventually leads to his death at the end of the novel. Yet, the second stroke also allows him to recover memories that are crucial in his reconstruction of his identity, the memories of his heroic childhood deeds against the Fascists and of his love for Lila Saba. While being in the “fog” of a semi-conscious state, Yambo questions the authenticity of his memories. Yet, he ultimately decides that he must accept them as the truth, because, “if we doubt that a world exists around us [...] we will fall down the stairs or die of hunger” (*The Mysterious Flame* 419-420). Thus, even though Yambo's memory is not entirely recovered, and the novel does not conclude with an epiphanic vision—Yambo does not manage to remember Lila's face—Eco's protagonist manages to reconstruct a “minor” history of his life. In addition, Yambo's return to Italy during World War II allows the readers themselves to recover moments of their past that are crucial to awakening them from the “fog” of the current state of cultural amnesia. By witnessing the reconstruction of Yambo's identity, Italian readers recollect moments of public memory that, with Italy's so-called return to the right since the end of the old millennium, have been constantly subjected to conservative revisionism. The numerous examples of authentic linguistic and visual Fascist memorabilia that the novel provides reconstruct the cultural imaginary of an entire generation while developing the readers' awareness of the hegemonic forces that have shaped their identity in the past and may still do so today. While oppressive regimes may be a reality of the past—at least for some countries—people may still be victims, or even inadvertent collaborators, of more democratic “*regimetti*” that build consensus through the manipulation of discourses.³² *The Mysterious Flame* intends to affect the

³² I am using Tabucchi's definition of the democratic form of Fascism established under the Berlusconi governments through the manipulation of media and other forms of cultural production (Tabucchi, *L'oca al passo* 161).

contemporary reader who is bombarded by biased views of reality and revisionist accounts of history in the same way that comic books and highbrow literature, respectively, affect the adolescent and the adult Yambo, by allowing the former “to construct a social conscience” in the midst of a cultural politics—that of the Fascist years—that is deeply conformist, and the latter to come out of the fog of his current amnesia. In *The Mysterious Flame* Eco combines his politics of non-dogmatic *impegno* with a more extroverted poetics, one that indicates more clearly that the author’s message is to be understood not only as an act of private dissent but also as an attempt to promote collective resistance. Personal memory is used as a bridge to rebuild communal memory and, while remaining open and fluid, the postmodernist subject finds a place in history through belonging to an alternative narrative of collective identity that challenges monolithic views of the Self and invites readers to resist the dogma of grand *récits*.³³ In *The Mysterious Flame*, readers are not required to accept the interpretation of a truth-teller who imposes her/his personal testimony from the top; in fact, they are continuously reminded that, being in a comatose state, the protagonist may be dreaming rather than remembering. Nonetheless, readers are encouraged to develop a critical understanding of the past, which will allow them to build a new relationship with their present. As Rocco Capozzi has claimed, intertextuality brings neorealistic elements into Eco’s later fiction, thus significantly reducing postmodernist ambiguity and skepticism (“Double Coding Memorabilia” 138). Yet, ultimately, the external world is brought into Eco’s novel to promote cognitive change through the path of a negative realism; its goal is to develop the readers’ “negative capability” to resist bad interpretations, while coming to terms with the fact that they may never know for sure “*what is the case*.” In other words, readers are invited to engage in acts of interpretation that will construct a democratic path for achieving social transformation.

Like *The Mysterious Flame*, Eco’s latest novel, *The Prague Cemetery*, emphasizes art’s ability to foster the recovery of cultural memories that can reshape the imaginary. Affected by amnesia and a multiple personality disorder, the novel’s evil protagonist, Simone Simonini, attempts to recover his memory by keeping a diary that should act as a “talking-cure,” the remedy suggested by an Austrian psychoanalyst, Froïde, who is a fictional alter ego of Sigmund Freud. Set during the social uprisings of 19th-century

³³ On the role of history in *The Mysterious Flame* see also Milda Danyte (“National Past/Personal Past”).

Europe, Simonini's diary records the protagonist's life from his conservative upbringing in Piedmont, where he was prompted by his grandfather to construct his identity based on the hatred for anarchy and cultural otherness, to his work as a forger and spy for the secret services of international governments that attempt to quell social revolts. Simonini's victims range from the supporters of an Italian Republic during the *Risorgimento* to the French anti-imperialists and the Russian anti-Czarists, from the Freemasons to his own worst enemy and every nation's ideal scapegoat, the Jews. As we are told, the protagonist builds his fortune by exploiting the mechanisms of 19th-century Machiavellian politics. Much like that of today, this politics does not shrink from transcending the law in the name of "public good" and goes as far as constructing enemies towards whom it can redirect public discontent and social fears that, otherwise, would threaten the "imagined" community of the nation. As the head of the Russian secret services, Pyotr Rachkovskij, tells Simonini, empires and nations are more concerned with cultivating than with killing their enemies, because enemies are an important tool to reinforce national identity and prevent popular uprisings:

"We need an enemy to give people hope. [...] National identity is the last bastion of the dispossessed. But the meaning of identity is now based on hatred, on hatred for those who are not the same. Hatred has to be cultivated as a civic passion. The enemy is the friend of the people. You always want someone to hate in order to feel justified in your own misery. [...]" (*The Prague Cemetery*, 342).

Nonetheless, as the novel suggests, it is hard to predict the effects of a "liquid" reality, of a world where biased interpretations, such as the ones constructed by a politics based on the "state of exception," have conquered the imaginary as if they were objective truths. In the case of Simonini's ultimate masterpiece of forgery, the construction of an enemy will lead to something much worse than cultural hatred. By plagiarizing popular literature such as *feuilletons* and political pamphlets, and the anti-Semitic rhetoric of periodicals, such as the French *Libre Parole*, Simonini creates *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the rabbinical speeches proposing the Jewish domination of the world. Reconstructing the authentic game of plagiarisms and disseminations that went into the making of the *Protocols*, Eco makes Simonini into the author of a forgery whose overwhelming impact on the imaginary would lead to the extermination of an entire race.³⁴

³⁴ In *The Prague Cemetery* Eco reconstructs the games of borrowings and plagiarisms from works by Dumas, Sue, Jolie and Barruel that actually went into the

In the conclusion of *The Prague Cemetery*, the external “Narrator,” who hands on and, at times, summarizes Simonini’s diary to the reader, explains that the novel is based entirely on historical facts. The only fictional invention is the protagonist, who, on the other hand, as readers suspect all along, “did in some sense exist” and “is still among us” (439). The mischievous deeds attributed to Simonini are none other than the subtexts of history that were repressed by the grand narratives of the making of modern nations. Brought back to the surface through Simonini’s psychoanalytic process of memory recovery, these subtexts invite today’s readers to view national identity as a fiction constructed at the expense of any differing forms of internal and external otherness. This fiction, as the novel suggests, continues to cause social oppression in the current world, where an outmoded notion of nationalism based on the exclusion of the Other “is still,” or, rather, is more than ever “among us”. Like *The Mysterious Flame*, *The Prague Cemetery* attempts to free the readers’ imaginary from its subjection to bad interpretations of reality that cause social oppression. The novel invites us to draw a comparison between the Machiavellian techniques used by 19th-century politics, which Simonini ironically also weaves into his *Protocols*, and those used by today’s local and global sovereignties in order to practice what can be viewed as a democratic form of fascism. Today’s “*regimetti*,” like those of yesterday, subject people to their own will through the manipulation of discourses that impose on the social imaginary the truths of the powerful. Masking themselves as liberators of the subaltern classes, today’s sovereignties have put into action the plan to conquer the world that the *Protocols* attribute to the Jews; they have accustomed people to a capitalist lifestyle while depriving them of a political conscience and while eliminating from their surroundings any forms of counter-discourse that could foster critical thinking and, thus, ultimately inspire new revolts against the oppressors:

For the worker we will appear to be liberators, feigning to love him according to the principles of brotherhood proclaimed by our Freemasonry. [...] But our purpose is the opposite: we are interested in the degeneration of Gentiles. Our strength consists in keeping the worker in a state of penury and impotence, since by doing so we keep him subject to our will, and in his own surroundings he will never find the power and energy to rise up against us. (420)

Eco’s novel suggests that in circumstances such as these, and, thus, in a world such as that of today, literature’s most important task is that of restoring peo-

making of the *Protocols*. On this topic see Newberger Goldstein (“Umberto Eco and the Elders of Zion”).

ple's ability to interpret the world critically. Nonetheless, as the author's serious, yet also ironic reference to Zola's public defense of Dreyfus shows—Simonini authors the *bordereau* that sparked the Dreyfus affair—, his intention is not to impose the acceptance of his own interpretations, however good these might be (411-12).³⁵ Unlike Zola's, Eco's own "J'accuse" is played on fictional grounds and is activated through the democratic cooperation between reader and author in the construction of meaning. Eco uses the language of *feuilletons* to write a meta-*feuilleton*, a novel that will affect the imaginary by laying bare the mechanisms of power production, the way in which power uses none other than popular, everyday discourses to influence our understanding of the world. The external Narrator of the *Prague Cemetery* may be passing on authentic historical facts but, nonetheless, from the very beginning of the novel, he also warns readers about his own fallibility. As the Narrator claims, he is none other than a reader himself, who plans to construct his understanding "together with the [external] Reader," "while both of [them] look on inquisitively and follow what [the protagonist] is noting down on those sheets of paper" (4). Just as in *Kant and the Platypus*, in his latest novels, Eco enriches his poetic discourse with empiric knowledge in the form of stories, or parables, that bring the unconscious layers of reality and history back to a conscious level.³⁶ These parables promote cognitive change without offering a ready-made interpretation that violates the democratic pact between author and reader; their aim is to help readers recover the ability to discriminate between cultural messages in order to be able to make ethical judgments on their own.

In his latest fiction, Eco combines the disenchanted attitude of post-modernist metafiction with what is commonly viewed as a more typically post-postmodern attitude towards history; he rehabilitates social history and pairs anti-foundationalism with the search for new values that a community can share in order to counteract the extended impact of power and capital on society.³⁷ Inspired by the cultural politics of today's world, Eco's

³⁵ Pierluigi Pellini suggests that Zola can also be viewed as a model of contemporary intellectuals such as Tabucchi, because he used non-fiction writing only sporadically as a means to express his social engagement. Ultimately, like the contemporary intellectual, Zola viewed the writer as an interpreter of the world rather than as an organic legislator (Pellini, "Lo scrittore come intellettuale" 135-163).

³⁶ On the uses of exemplary stories in *Kant and The Platypus* see Mussnug ("Traces of Analytic Philosophy" 139-154).

³⁷ I am referring to Gabrielle Spiegel's definition of today's post-postmodern history ("The Task of the Historian").

desire to appeal to the model reader is combined with the political urgency to promote community building. This social urgency is one of the main traits that bind together Eco's late postmodernism and the "connotative realism," or rather, the "critical and mythopoetic postmodernism" of "New Italian Epic."³⁸ Like new epics such as Wu Ming's own historical novels, Eco's recent fiction indicates a renewed sense of trust in art's ability to provide more genuine, even if not final, accounts of the past that can cure readers of conventional viewpoints and can become the sources of a new public ethos (Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic* 146). Like new epics, Eco's novels also draw extensively on historical documentary to shorten the distance between text and world and turn the author-reader relationship into a historical force (21-22). Yet, Eco's fiction shows that, contrary to Wu Ming's contention, contemporary Italian epic can also be produced through a reworking of the language of postmodernist metafiction (22-24). Realist writing can continue to exist and exercise its ethical message, as always, in two modes; first through a realism of process that reflects on the social production of cultural discourses in order to promote critical awareness, and, second, through a realism of product whose counter-narratives aspire to become the source of a new utopian epos.³⁹ Thus, instead of speaking of an overcoming of postmodernism and a return to realism, we could argue that, in today's Italy, poetic realism, as it pertains specifically to the discourse of the novel, presents at least two modes of artistic intervention. The first mode, which is Eco's, develops from the "*etica minima*" of postmodernist realism and aims at exposing the fictions of truth, thus reaffirming the model of the intellectual as interpreter. The other mode of intervention develops, instead, from the "*etica massima*" of new realism and emphasizes the role of literature as bearer of authentic truths, thus turning the writer into a contemporary version of the Romantic prophet or a new type of organic intellectual. Albeit in different ways, both types of ethical writing are using the historical novel to subvert monolithic narratives of cul-

³⁸ The definition of "critical and mythopoetic postmodernism" comes from Petrella ("Dal postmoderno al romanzo epico" 147). Jansen reworks Petrella's definition in her description of late postmodernist *impegno* as a politics that links together recent metafiction and New Italian Epic (Jansen, "The Epics of Reality").

³⁹ On the double discourse of realism see Linda Hutcheon (*Narcissistic Narrative*). Ruth Glynn applies a similar theory to the discourse of the postmodernist historical novel where, as she claims, the work's ethical task is exercised either through the use of microhistory or through the language of metafiction (*Contesting the Monument* 29).

tural identity while creating a new and more inclusive discourse of national belonging. And, while it is probably too soon to tell which one of these two modes of writing will be more effective in the long run, we can nonetheless hope that both will manage to achieve their ultimate common goal of having a positive transformative effect on their readers.

UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO

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