

REALISM IN TWO PIECES¹

Who's afraid of interpretation?

85

There is a quote by Richard Rorty that has never seemed more pertinent, and it goes like this: “Take care of freedom and truth can take care of itself.” All this big talk about realism, either old or new, that has been going on in the last few months, seems to be a lot less concerned with taking “care” of truth than doing that for reality – a difference in expression that might merit a bit more attention. Try for example switching “truth” for “reality” in the New Testament phrase “the truth will set you free”. Are we really all the more free the more “realistic” we become, or is the other way round, inasmuch a realist harbors no illusions, accepts things as they are and perhaps even stops fighting against the apparent imbalance of forces in the world? We should recall that it was Kant who founded no less than the existence of God on the observation that in the real world evil generally wins over the good; but if that was the whole story, our real and moral lives would make no sense, forcing us to postulate Someone who will, at the end, make virtue coincide with happiness. Our neo-realists making such a great fuss today certainly do not want to promote the world as an all-out battlefield, but would rather present themselves as the true defend-

¹ This article on the subject on new realism consists of two parts. The first part *Who's Afraid of Interpretation?* (It. *Chi ha paura dell'interpretazione?*) is a text first published in the daily newspaper *La Stampa* on 22nd November 2012. The second part, titled *The Return of Reality as a Return to Order* (It. *Il ritorno della realtà come ritorno all'ordine*) reproduces Professor Vattimo's letter to Professor Umberto Eco.

ers of morality. But does “reality” truly need to be defended? Defended from what or from whom? They say that from Nietzsche, the dangerous revolutionary for whom there were “no facts, only interpretations”. But who is so afraid of interpretation? And once more: try and exchange “truth” for “reality” in so many of those phrases we could never do without. “To tell you the reality...”, for instance, or: “Realistically, I tell you.”, or even “They were ready to die as martyrs for reality...” When we think about it carefully, the whole difference between the two lies in the fact that truth is always something one tells, while reality is simply there to begin with and that is that. And here is where both Kant and interpretation make their reappearance: to be told, truth needs a subject who tells it. But the one telling the truth is the one who describes “things as they are”, hence reality as such. Is that true? We know that a map identical to the territory it describes would be useless: it would simply coincide with the territory. To be of any use, the map has to choose a scale, a point of view, a type of things that it wants to show (elevation, for example, or differences in climate). Is that not an interpretation? Very well, some would reply, but the things shown by the map “are out there”, the map has not made them up on its own. That may very well be, but should we consider this “being out there” as a fact that exists beyond all interpretation? And is it possible to claim that without referring again to a particular interpretation? Is there any such thing as a “non-interpretative” map, whose reference would be a conventionally accepted fact that could avoid infinite re-referrals? For the map of the metro – the actual metro existing in Paris; for the time zones – the Greenwich meridian, and so on. You find that shocking and disturbing? But should we really be distrusting measures of length or longitude and latitude just because they are based on a convention? The fact that these conventions work appears to mean that they are “founded in reality”. But is there really any such thing as a zero meridian out there? We think of these measures as “founded” merely because they function, just as any hermeneutical disciple of that evil old Nietzsche still takes trains, planes or elevators without a doubt in the sciences and technologies that constructed them. The question is: why does everyone seem to want me to say that my taking planes and trains also implies my belief in science telling the truth, i.e., reflecting “reality” as it is?

Let us return to the question of who and why might be afraid of interpretation and would feel this need to defend truth-as-reality. There is good reason to suspect that Rorty was right and that beneath this (unnecessary) defense of truth-as-reality there lies a fear of freedom. Dear God, there is nothing sacred, as Arbasino would have put it on this point. If we can no longer refer to

a certain and unshakeable fundament, everything is permitted, as Dostoevsky feared in the case of God's non-existence. It seems that without a final "objective" truth (whatever that might mean) which everyone could or should concede to, neither true morality nor a true struggle against the lies of propaganda or superstition are possible. Yet every stubborn hermeneutic taking trains and planes is still able to distinguish the true from the false without needing to refer to absolute standards or touch first-hand that which goes-not without saying. He contents himself with the Paris metro and the Greenwich meridian, at least until someone tries to tax him for a different measuring standard. It is when this happens – when we are hit (not only financially) by bad measure – that we begin to search for a more certain and more fundamental criterion to refer to. This is also and above all true in the case of laws governing communal life. But, do we really have to refer to natural law and human essence to avoid running a red light? Of course not. We start asking questions about the fundament in cases such as assisted reproduction or social rights: within the realm of ethics. In this domain, trying to act according to a truth-as-reality doesn't make any sense or should have merely the sense of forcing us to "realistically" accept things as they are. We have, then, not strayed far in our suspicion that this thirst for the currently circulating (neo?) realism is essentially a mere call to order, a sort of appeal to technicians to flee the confusion of democratic debates along with their tedious pace. Some have suggested digging up the old Kantian distinction between the natural sciences, "science", that is, and the sciences of the spirit (ethics, politics, religion, etc), leaving the realm of the "true", experimental truth to the former, while the second one sticks to interpreting. A nice idea (originally proposed precisely by Kant) if it weren't for the fact that no one has so far been able to answer the following question: who is it that is supposed to draw the dividing line between the two fields?

The Return of Reality as a Return to Order (Letter to Umberto Eco)

Dear Umberto, I would like to begin in medias res (ouch! Right to the things themselves!) to discuss your essay on "negative realism". Two things first. Number one: does any one of these new realists actually think that a postmodernist would use a screwdriver to clean out his ears or his writing desk in order to get from Milan to Agognate? Paradoxical examples are all too often taken too seriously, ending up as caricatures it would be best to get rid of. Number two: do you remember Proudhon? One summer quite a few years ago someone sud-

denly dragged out Proudhon of all people into the open and started an inconclusive debate that dragged on for a while before dwindling to nothing. This new realism seems to me a similar phenomenon even if it threatens to go on longer, which probably has something to do with the general climate of “return to order” and its most vivid expression in the current government of “technicians”. So what are the reasons behind this “return to reality” aimed against the “postmodern binge”? Who is it that cares so much about “returning to reality” and warding off Nietzsche’s thesis’ which claims “there are no facts, only interpretations and even this is an interpretation”? You will of course immediately respond by saying that this is an improper question: that we ought to be concerned only with the truth or falsity of the thesis and not with who happens to like or dislike it. But you should also admit this immediately forces Nietzsche into accepting that there is such a thing as that famous objective truth he had disputed. Thus, it seems that what these new realists hold as the objective truth is the “fact” that “postmodernism has failed”. But is this failure really a fact and not an interpretation? The strength of Nietzsche’s thesis – particularly for someone who is not willing to give in to the world as it is and identify every being-of-things-as-they-are with the good and a norm to be “respected” – lies entirely in interrogating every utterance on “who says so?” Marx’ concept of ideology, as well as the whole so-called “school of suspicion” (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) should have taught us something by now. Alright, you’ll say, but Marx attacked ideology precisely in the name of an objective truth. But for him this truth was the proletariat as the owner of assets (“who says so?”), not being-itself, identified as that which cannot be thought otherwise – that which you call “the world” with its “facts”. The “facts” do not speak on their own: even pointing to them with a finger is already an act of linguistics. Realism (the old one, I guess: why should we call it new?) has always fed on the “fact” that there should be something out there, a “piece of data” limiting the interpretation, as you say, which does not depend on the interpreter. Not even the most fanatical postmodernist believes that “things” are simply created by the one looking at them. If it rains, I get wet, if I run into a wall, I hurt my nose. So? Is that what we are supposed to call the immovable base of being? Heidegger constructed a whole philosophy starting from his dissatisfaction with “metaphysics” as that which identifies being precisely with such an immovable base. And his dissatisfaction stemmed not from the discovery that being is no “base” at all, but mere hullabaloo or thin air, but from the impossibility of taking freedom seriously in a world made up only of immovable, base stuff, identified simply by always staying the same... The question of “who says so?” also

has an obvious ethically-political charge. The new realists (ever reproaching me for Heidegger's Nazism) should explain why one of their prophets should be John Searle, honored by Bush as the US' greatest philosopher. Will some of them be receiving similar recognition from the government of Monti and Napolitano? Of course, it's a fact (!) that the new realists have found a welcoming ear in public opinion (at least the one getting published) of the mainstream as they respond to the request for restoring "true" values and, ultimately, social discipline. Even you yourself still concern yourself with assuring "guarantees" for proposing interpretations that will be acceptable to others. "The others" is putting it right on the mark. Precisely because there are no facts, only interpretations, the only "base" I might bump into and which I should be taking into account – no guarantees possible – are the interpretations of others. I have no "objective" guarantee in order to convince them: only certain shared values, certain common experiences, certain readings we had all done, certain – something I have only become aware of now – class distinctions. The entire peril of hermeneutics lies in the following: it teaches us that the only interpretation which is definitely false (the limit of interpretation!) is one that does not recognize itself as such, that pretends to speak from the point of view of God and thus refuses any negotiation, believing it possesses the only real truth. But even the truth of a scientific proposition can keep claiming its status only if others, those who repeat the experiment, come up with the same results. Is this where the immovable base and the impenetrable wall will make their reappearance? But where would that be, if not in these very interpretations?

Translated by Izar Lunaček
