

# Thought Turned Upside Down And Inside Out

By Charles Clavey

*Review of* **LIVING THOUGHT: The Origins & Actuality of Italian Philosophy**, by Roberto Esposito, Zakiya Hanafi, *translator*

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Roberto Esposito thinks that European philosophy stands on the threshold of epochal change. The era of so-called French Theory—an alternative name for the broad current of post-structural philosophical inquiry and literary critique popularized by the likes of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze in the late 1970s and 1980s—is drawing to a close. Just a handful of years after French Theory began questioning human autonomy and deconstructing literary texts, it has exhausted itself in recondite arguments and recursive critiques. Even the idea of postmodernity itself—a term intimately connected to both French Theory and the American culture wars—has been replaced by the concept of a merely *late* modernity.

What comes after French Theory? What paradigm will emerge as the organizing principle of European philosophy, literature, and art? Will it continue existing lines of inquiry or return to earlier problems? Esposito, one of Italy's leading philosophers and a professor at its prestigious *Scuola Normale Superiore*, believes answering (or even *asking*) such questions is tremendously difficult because we remain trapped within French Theory's horizons. Absent the discovery of some Archimedean point, it is unlikely that we could see beyond them into an as-yet unknown world.

Esposito's new book, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy* (Stanford University Press, 2012) is an ambitious search for the philosophical foundation of this unknown future world. As a consequence of the insuperable gulf between our present and this future, its philosophy must appear fantastically incomprehensible from our perspective. To us, Esposito writes, it would seem to be “thought that came into the world turned upside down and inside out” (10). *Living Thought* presents the case that Italian philosophy from the Renaissance to the present is this upside-down and inside-out thought. Rejected by the philosophical mainstream dominated by French and German ideas, Italian philosophy appears confused and confusing, a strange admixture of Renaissance humanism and hermeneutic high theory. Yet it is precisely because Italian philosophy is so *inattuale* (outmoded, unfashionable, untimely) that it is thoroughly *attuale* (current, timely, modern). In contradistinction to French Theory, peninsular thought is “capable of keeping its reserve of meaning intact—or at least still alive—at a time when these dynamics [of modernity] no longer seem up to the task of coping with the questions and conflicts that arose from them” (22). Esposito's Nietzschean aim is to transform this outsider status from weakness into strength by thinking against the present for the sake of the future.

Esposito argues that Italian thought is a coherent intellectual tradition, an *unphilosophical* philosophy in contradistinction to the intellectual trajectory set by northern-European thinkers. In an innovative, if controversial, interpretation, Esposito maintains that European philosophy from Descartes onwards, was defined by the twinned gestures of abstraction and exclusion. Wedded to the interpretation of reality through reason and the circumscription of the world within general laws, modern European philosophy was unable to assimilate the irrational, the chaotic, and the disquieting. Empiricism, rationalism, and speculative metaphysics all mistook a muted representation for the proper fullness of reality. Refusing this path, peninsular thinkers from Machiavelli to Vico and Gramsci to Agamben maintained an unwavering fidelity to the real, to the contingent and originary. Italian realism, then, took shape as the intellectual tradition that sought to articulate the manifold complexity of reality even at the expense of abstraction,

generalization, and rationalization. If Italian philosophy appears upside down and inside out, Esposito believes, it is only because it is a living thought (*pensiero vivente*) that has forgone such trappings in favor of a truer and deeper entanglement with life.

Such realist convictions might suggest a certain similarity between Italian thought and the philosophical schools of empiricism to positivism. Certainly all three reject the speculative metaphysics of German idealism and the epistemological questioning of Cartesian rationalism in favor of an unwavering fidelity to reality. As Auguste Comte wrote in 1856, philosophy “rests at every point upon the unchangeable Order of the world.”<sup>1</sup> But that’s as far as the similarities go. In Italian realism, life lies beyond both sensorium and intellect; it is—no other word suffices—an altogether more *mystical* phenomenon. “Life,” Esposito writes in his analysis of the nineteenth-century philosopher and revolutionary nationalist Vincenzo Cuoco, “in its material grain, protrudes out of the progressive dimension of history, setting a limit of internal contrast to it, making its plasticity problematic and risky. The Real, given its sticky, opaque character...cannot be entirely diluted and absorbed into the historical flow” (108). Always eluding the kinds of human attempt to understand and master it that are characteristic of French positivism and British empiricism, life remains, in the Italian view, unassimilable.

Like the idealist and materialist dialectic, Italian realism charts development over time through negation and opposition. Again—at least in Esposito’s interpretation—the resemblances are merely superficial. Rather than figure development as forward progress, Italian thought conceives it as elliptical return, or, as made famous by the Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico’s Enlightenment text, *New Science*, as *ricorso*. Against European philosophy’s repeated rejection of origins, Italian thought, Esposito holds, understands the strength derived through *ricorso* and adopts it as a unifying principle. “The return to the beginning,” Esposito writes, “like a ricochet movement, coincides with the drive to the new. Freed of any regressive mythology, the origin is the moment when—skipping over the present current—the past projects life into the free and open space of its future” (51). The present cannot outpace its origins. Rather, every moment carries its genesis with it as a secret kernel.

Such resemblances and resonances make it easy to describe Italian realism by triangulating its position against better-known currents of European philosophy. But, *sui generis* among European philosophies, the tradition remains almost impossible to define. Indeed, the very idea of a definition seems antithetical to the realist project. Esposito’s inscrutable prose and allusive style complicate the matter still further. Though ably translated by Zakiya Hanafi, Esposito’s writing is marked by the kind of abstruse jargon and idiom all-too-common in contemporary theory and criticism. We are, for instance, not only told about “the immunization *dispositif*” but also informed that it is part of a “biotechnics”—or “capacity for the animal-human’s altered self-fabrication”—that “may seem obvious today” (42). Sustaining the considerable effort merely to decode such prose, Esposito’s readers are to wonder, at times, what is really *going on* in *Living Thought*.

Most basically, *Living Thought* is an intellectual history of Italian thought from the Renaissance to the present. As Esposito narrates this five-hundred-year development, it becomes clear that realism is *itself* subject to a kind of *ricorso*. This is to say that contemporary Italian thought is the product of the tradition’s elliptical return to its first origins. It is, therefore, necessary to return to such origins in order to understand how Italian realism will succeed French Theory. For Esposito, Italian realism was born of the humanist ambition to study man *in situ*. “What dominates the scene laid out on the dry, terse pages of Machiavelli’s text,” Esposito writes, “is not the regularity of general laws, but the contingency of unpredictable events” (47). Rather than succumb to the philosophical impetus to subsume such particulars under conceptual

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<sup>1</sup> Auguste Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, trans. J.H. Bridges (London: Routledge, 1848), 29.

universals, later Enlightenment and Romantic philosophers, poets, and critics—figures like Francesco de Sanctis and Giacomo Leopardi—elevated this naïve realism into a conscious mediation between life and thought. “One could say that de Sanctis’s entire intellectual and political project,” Esposito writes in an interpretation of the critic that is also an apt characterization of the period more broadly, “is marked by this need, repeated with pounding regularity: to give life to ideas, and to root ideas in life” (133).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Italian realism reached its apogee and abnegation in the strange idealism of Benedetto Croce, Antonio Gramsci, and Giovanni Gentile. Their shared aim, according to Esposito, was to subsume philosophy within the real, to replace thought with life. As Gentile, the philosopher and fascist ideologue, wrote in 1920, there was to be a new philosophy which was “not an abstract philosophy placed over and above life in order to understand it...but that concrete philosophy, which...is inseparably associated with life and is life itself, one might say, in the full vigor of its own awareness” (175). No longer merely *unphilosophical*, this new philosophy appeared manifestly *antiphilosophical*.

Yet the principle of *ricorso* demands that realism return to its origins. “Italian thought,” Esposito argues in the book’s final chapters, “appears to have entirely renewed itself after a period of complete retreat, rediscovering some of the qualities of its original inspiration” (218). Discarding the tradition’s permutations and distortions, contemporary Italian philosophers like Mario Tronti, Gianni Vattimo, and Giorgio Agamben have returned with renewed vigor to the task of mediating between life and thought, origin and history. Against the static binaries of contemporary theory these Italians propose the more fluid categories developed by Machiavelli, Bruno, and Vico, figuring *the real* as an “epicenter of continuous modification” and a site of constant “contact and communication: (260). Precisely because it is archaic, Esposito argues, this paradigm affords contemporary Italian realism formidable critical power against modernity’s most persistent ideologies: the sovereign self, the secular world, and the human being.

*Living Thought* displays Esposito’s virtuoso range and deft touch. Especially impressive is his ability to join analyses of philosophy and politics to interpretations of art and lyric. As the *unphilosophical* philosophy, Italian thought, Esposito shows, was present as much in Dante’s epic and Leonardo’s painting as in Machiavelli’s political thought and Croce’s idealism. Here are truly accomplished readings: an analysis of Leonardo’s *Battle of the Anghiari* that shows the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of depicting origins; a discussion of Leopardi’s *Zibaldone* that attends to the poet’s erasure of the boundary between human and animal. The list could go on. Hardly more than *apercus*, these readings nevertheless convey more than the sum of their parts. In Esposito’s hands, they are a quiet demonstration of the conceptual and thematic coherence in Italian thought; they are an argument for the true unity of the tradition beneath its apparent diversity. These readings become, in short, an elegant argument for the geographical and thematic expansion of the philosophical canon. As Esposito shows, more people, places, and works *matter* to the history and future of European thought than currently come under discussion and analysis.

Esposito’s ambitions reach far beyond the revision and expansion of European intellectual history. *Living Thought* is an intervention in contemporary continental philosophy and, as such, asks—demands—to be evaluated in terms of its argument. Esposito returns again and again to his central contention: as modern European philosophy begins its own grand *ricorso* (evident in the demise of French Theory), the realism of living thought will become the paradigm of inquiry and analysis. Stripped of its philosophical heroics and theoretical posturing, this argument turns on a straightforward question: can Esposito convince us that Italian thought is likely to succeed French Theory as the dominant framework of European philosophy?

The answer to this question is, I believe, no. At the heart of Esposito’s argument for a turn to Italian thought is the contention that its realist trajectory was excluded from European modernity defined by

French and German philosophy. “Italian thought,” he writes, “is situated on the other side of modernity, or, more precisely, along a tangent that cuts across it diagonally, without being absorbed by it” (22). So firm is his faith in a peninsular difference that Esposito never pauses to consider whether traces of Italian realism might, in fact, be found elsewhere in modern philosophy. Yet even a cursory glance reveals elements supposedly native to Italian thought scattered throughout European modernity.

Thematic affinities abound. Consider, for instance, the French philosopher and social activist Simone Weil’s own fusion of realism and mysticism. Or look to the German critical theorist Theodor Adorno’s micrological metaphysics of the particular sustained by a negative dialectics. This is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Weil, Adorno, and others voiced trenchant critiques of a European philosophical tradition that, like Italian thought, was dissatisfied with its attentiveness to *the real*.

Other connections are more direct. In 1929 a young Samuel Beckett analyzed the place of Dante, Bruno, and Vico in James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. James, Beckett argued, drew on Vico and Dante for the work’s elliptical structure and turned to Bruno to construct its theory of language. “Basta!” Beckett exclaimed, “Vico and Bruno are here, and more substantially than would appear from the swift survey of the question.” “And,” he wrote, “if you don’t understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you’re too decadent to receive it.”<sup>2</sup> Though it was Joyce who set Beckett to the task of reading Vico and Bruno and then urged him to write on the Italians’ place in the new work,<sup>3</sup> the point remains: Renaissance and Enlightenment Italian thought lie at the very heart of modernism’s challenges to the philosophical pieties of European modernity.

These categories themselves—Renaissance and Enlightenment—reflect the depth of Italian philosophy’s involvement with the construction of modernity as well as its challenge to it. Since Jacob Burckhardt, the Italian Renaissance has been synonymous with the birth of *l’uomo universale* and used as a kind of shorthand for the rise of modern individuality. It was in Italy, Burckhardt wrote, that the veil of the Middle Ages “melted into air” to reveal man as a “spirited individual...[who] recognized himself as such.”<sup>4</sup> More recent philosophers and historians from Isaiah Berlin and Hans Baron to J.G.A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner have expanded on this claim, finding in the politics of the Italian city-states the philosophical origins, institutional structure, and civic obligations of political liberty of *modern* Europe.

Even such brief excursions point to the fact that Italian thought was not as unknown to and isolated from northern European philosophy as Esposito believes. Certainly Renaissance humanism, Vichian *ricorso*, and Crocean idealism are departures from and innovations within the dominant currents of European philosophy, but this dominance itself is a consequence of the history of academic disciplines and the formation of philosophical canons. The distinction between upside-down and right-side-up thought is a recent and contingent one. By erasing this history and naturalizing this distinction, Esposito commits the same errors of distraction and generalization with which he charges the European philosophy he decries. “After a long period of retreat (or at least stalling),” Esposito opens the book by writing, “the times appear to be favorable again for Italian philosophy” (1). Retreat from what? Stalling on whose part? *Pace* Esposito,

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett, “Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce” in *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 11, 9.

<sup>3</sup> As Joyce once told the French writer Valery Larbaud regarding *Our Exagmination*, “I did stand behind those twelve Marshals more or less directing them what lines of research to follow.” As cited in Gordon Bowker, *James Joyce: A New Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2012), 387. Compare Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 76.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S.G.C. Middlemore (New York: Macmillan & Co, 1904), 129.

Italian thought cannot replace modern European philosophy for the simple fact that it has been present in it all along.

Occasional asides and unexplored allusions suggest that Esposito is not unaware of such transalpine connections. Why, then, would he ignore the intertwined histories of Italy and modern Europe with such determination? The instance of biopolitics, which Esposito takes to be central to Italian realism, is illuminating. In Esposito's telling biopolitics is no recent development but an enduring feature of Italian thought from Machiavelli to Gramsci and beyond. In a clever interpretive twist, for example, Esposito argues that the Enlightenment reformer Cesare Beccaria overturned Dante's poetics of sacral violence with a politics of restrained punishment and, in so doing, inaugurated a modern regime of biopolitical sovereignty. If this sounds familiar, that's probably because it is: Esposito is freely adapting the arguments of the French Theorist Michel Foucault. While it is certainly true that several Italian philosophers—including Esposito himself—have made important contributions to this field, Esposito is here boldly relocating both the advent and discovery of modernity's biopolitics to Italy. In so doing Esposito implicitly claims an Italian origin for French Theory. Problematic as an instance of both intellectual attribution and argumentative consistency, Esposito's arguments and silences about biopolitics render *Living Thought* less speculation about the future of European philosophy than attempt to claim rightful ownership of its present. "Nothing deep and intrinsic binds Italian philosophy to the Italian nation," Esposito writes (19). No doubt this is an interesting argument, but it hardly keeps *Living Thought* from appearing as a *sub rosa* nationalist feint.

Esposito is hardly alone in writing such a book. Since at least the late 1980s there has been a steady stream of articles, monographs, and collections proclaiming the importance of peninsular ideas and intellectuals. Equal parts exposition and exhortation, this genre rests on the conviction that Italian thought matters and on the suspicion that it is being ignored. *Living Thought* is motivated by the same preoccupations; though originally written in Italian, the book seems intended to introduce English-language readers to Italian philosophy as both alter and salutary to a beleaguered European modernity. Esposito sacrifices the true complexity of this relationship—between Italy and northern Europe, early modernity and modernity—for the simplicity of polemic. Lacking the comprehensiveness of Brian and Rebecca Copenhaver's excellent anthology, *From Kant to Croce: Modern Philosophy in Italy, 1800-1950*, and the scholarly perspicacity of Rocco Rubini's new monograph, *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism between Hegel and Heidegger*, it is unclear exactly what audience *Living Thought* might serve. Neither general enough for the novice nor acute enough for the expert, it may be that Esposito's book will appeal only to the already convinced. The rest of us, the uninitiated, may encounter the text as a spur to thought, as an opportunity to see the tangle of competing traditions, overlapping arguments, and intertwined philosophies that make up modernity's upside-down, inside-out living thought.

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