

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 1 *Autumn*

Article 25

1986

An Interview with Franco Rella

John Paul Russo

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Russo, John Paul (1986) "An Interview with Franco Rella," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*. Vol. 1 , Article 25.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol1/iss1/25>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu, hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu.

An Interview with Franco Rella

conducted by John Paul Russo

JPR: To what degree do you consider yourself linked to other Italian critics of your generation?

FR: Sertoli, Cacciari, Rovatti, Veca, Agamben: we are all of the same generation, a little younger than Vattimo, Bodei, and Gargani. One could say that we have reacted against the same teachers, we have read the same books, we have had analogous experiences. And one could say that the definition of "negative thought" is rather good for designating the climate, the "tonality" of thought which has discovered, in the great philosophers and writers at the turn of the century, the symptoms of insufficiency, of the incapacity of historicism and of the dialectic confronted with the phenomena of the "modern." "Crisis of reason" has been an editorial formula of great success insofar as it collected a series of diverse procedures which, on diverse planes, were making this orientation explicit; which were articulating, next to the great "names" of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, the thought of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault. This happened in the 1970s. The

[Translated from the Italian by John Paul Russo]

roads then diversified. Veca, for example, has worked on a neo-contractual hypothesis (from J.S. Mill and Rawls); Cacciari has explored the terrain of the unsayable (the mystical); Agamben has worked on the rapport between language and thought; Vattimo and Rovatti have elaborated a hypothesis of "weak thought": thought in an age in which being manifests itself as "decline." I myself have been concerned with the theme of a "knowledge" of images and narrative, that which comprises a recovery of a strong notion of the subject as a place for the *experience of form*, as an actor of a narrative turning (*peripezia narrativa*).

JPR: Would you discuss the "crisis" of '68 as an influence on your own thought and on your "generation"?

FR: Sixty-eight was the turn of an epoch in Italy. It meant a hitherto unknown diffusion of practices and political theories, of the production of partial knowledges, antagonistic to the system, several of which have changed our mode of perceiving the world. I refer in particular to feminism and to several "words" like "the quality of life" which have been central to political praxis. All of us were touched by this phenomenon to the good. On the negative side, too, through the betrayal of this great political utopia on the part of those who struggled against the state on the plane of violence, which precipitated the horror of terrorism.

JPR: Isn't it a fact that yours was the first *young* university generation to assume power in a hundred years, and quite suddenly after the crisis of '68? Isn't there a trace of "striking the fathers dead"?

FR: Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet,
 To give these mourning duties to your father,
 But you must know, your father lost a father,
 That father lost, lost his, and the survivor bound
 In filial obligation for some term
 To do obsequious sorrow. But to persevere
 In obstinate condolment is a course
 Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief,
 It shows a will most incorrect to heaven,
 A heart unfortified, a mind impatient,
 An understanding simple . . . 'tis a fault to heaven,
 A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
 To reason most absurd, whose common theme
 Is death of fathers.

"The common theme to reason is death of fathers." Reason develops, as Freud would say, in the elaboration of grief. I must reprimand my "fathers" for only one thing: a certain obtuseness toward several representations of thought which have been central to me. Representations through which I established my rapport with the world. Should I perhaps "hate" my fathers just because I have made extraordinary findings beyond their intellectual horizons?

JPR: Reason, therefore! What is "classical reason"? Is it the reason of "Descartes to Clerk Maxwell"? Why "classical" when it excludes Platonic and Neoplatonic reason? Or is it a general representation of Western metaphysics?

FR: In effect "classical reason" is an ambiguous term. It appeared in our writings for several years, but has almost completely disappeared. With this term we wanted to designate a thought with ambitions to dominate reality in a single language. A *totalizing* thought.

JPR: What are "new reasons"? Who has written with a "new reason"? What are the texts? Aren't these reasons nothing but the proliferating modes of procedure in science, social science, psychoanalysis . . . ?

FR: Even the term "new reason" is ambiguous, and is not used any more. I prefer to speak of new knowledges, of new strategies of thought. As for myself there are those strategies which put the accent not on the fact, but on the possible.

JPR: What, then, do you want the "new reason" to accomplish?

FR: The need of activating new strategies of thought bases itself on the fact that the plurality and complexity of the real are not more comprehensible (and not even describable) in terms of our habitual conceptual codes.

JPR: You do not write on the problems of technology. But technology according to Jaques Ellul is now a force greater than any of the others—greater than "ideology," Eastern or Western. Technology is an applied "classical reason" (Descartes, etc.), by definition, but this reason can hardly be said to be in crisis when it has virtually overcome all resistance. What do you think of this situation with respect to your argument? What is the "crisis" in the

1980s? It seems to me that there is, to paraphrase Juvenal, bread and video for the masses: consumerism.

FR: I am not writing on the new technology. We are thinking in a universe in which our capacity of vision, our perceptions, our imagination, has expanded through technology. It is enough to recall the transformation of the landscape in the nineteenth century with the emergence of "velocity"; the transformation of the landscape through new instruments of vision and of reproduction. The style of *Metamorfosi* proposes a philosophical structure of this time, even if it does not speak of the machines of this time. I have no antipathy toward technology, and I do not believe in its destructive domination over thought. Let us look, let us perceive, let us think more, not less. I love the present with all it offers me on the plane of yet unexplored possibility.

JPR: Juvenal (again!) asks who will guard the guardians? Who will control the "new reasons" and their procedures?

FR: The problem is not that of guardians. The problem is that of subjective, individual happiness: of all the subjects and of all the individuals. This is exactly the opposite of a "common good" determined by the state (from Plato to the totalitarianism of our century) and defended by the "guardians." I believe—with Aristotle—that the greatest happiness is in knowledge and in discovery; in pressing more deeply into the regions of the "possibles." There exists an epochal limit of possibility. It's the duty of all the subjects to expand these confines, of designing new frontiers: moving frontiers.

JPR: What do you think of Cacciari's concept of Workers' Power? Do you want a kind of American consumerism for the workers, an "American way of life" for them?

FR: I believe that Cacciari may have moved notably away from his past positions. Against Adorno and Marcuse, I don't think that the broadened use of things (what has been negatively defined as "consumerism") is in itself an evil. The struggle against pain, against ignorance, the prolongation of human life has some costs, which seem to me acceptable. I do not believe that a return to a state of "restricted consumption" is something to be hoped for—it has always meant "restricted to a small number of persons."

JPR: And your relations with the *francofortisti*?

FR: If I had to select a definition of my work, I would prefer, even if it's for others to decide, that of "creative writer," even if this creativity explicates itself in the field of philosophy and of thought.

JPR: Do you reject the Benjamin thesis on art in an "age of mechanical reproduction"?

FR: I am not in accord with Benjamin on the more "Frankfurt" side of his propositions. I am very much in agreement, however, when he speaks of the possibility of new techniques which offer, for example, the "acceleration" and the "slowing down." (Proust and the cinema use this very expedient.)

JPR: Have you objected to the lack of "limits"? It is against "reason"? A desire without limit?

FR: I have not objected to "limit." I have reflected often on the notion of "limit." I believe that it is necessary to work much on "limit" because even the limitless can in some way manifest itself.

JPR: What is your attitude toward liberal humanism as an ideology? Is it the ideology of the older professionate in Italy? Is humanism now a symbol for a culture that failed—the culture of Settembrini, for example, in *The Magic Mountain*? Do you use humanistic concepts (e.g., multiple viewpoints)?

FR: There is nothing more distant from the ideology of humanism than real humanism. It should suffice to read Ficino to recognize that the weight which he attributes to the image, to myth, to metamorphoses is above all else what we call humanism; not to speak of the "heroic thoughts" of Bruno and in any case of all the real erotic tension which sustains humanistic knowledge. James Hillman is nearer to humanism, such as it was, than the university/literary academy.

JPR: Italy, finally. Why do you write so little about it or its writers?

FR: One of the aspects of the present which fascinates me is that there exists, as Enzensberger had said, a world language of poetry. We can say that there is a world language of thought. I have often read along the same line of passion both Eliot and Montale. I have written by preference on authors who appeared to me more incisive in illuminating several traces of my intellectual ways, but I love Leopardi like Baudelaire. Maybe even the preference accorded

to foreign authors hides a desire of comparing it to world culture, given that Italian culture has had a rather peripheral role in the last two centuries. In any case, in 1985 two little books of mine will appear: the first is dedicated to Saba and Montale; the second to Plato, Vico, and Kafka. I have perhaps paid the debt for an unplanned silence.

*Rovereto, Riva del Garda
May 1,2, 1985*