

eScholarship

California Italian Studies

Title

Introduction: Remembering Gianni Vattimo

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2w90g7nw>

Journal

California Italian Studies, 13(2)

Author

Snyder, Jon R.

Publication Date

2024

DOI

10.5070/C313264469

Copyright Information

Copyright 2024 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Introduction: Remembering Gianni Vattimo

Jon R. Snyder

In the course of its existence, *California Italian Studies* has published essays by living Italian philosophers who were luminaries in the field, including Umberto Eco and Franco Cassano (now both deceased). Somehow, however, the pages of this journal never until now have hosted any contribution by Gianni Vattimo, the great Italian philosopher who passed away in September 2023 at age 87. Vattimo was a beloved teacher, a mentor, and a friend to several of the founding members of *CIS*, myself included, so it seems particularly appropriate for us to offer a posthumous homage to him in this open-theme issue of volume 13. I will offer just a few personal reminiscences here, as both Maurizio Ferraris and Simonetta Moro address in their respective essays the core tenets of Vattimo's philosophy. Vattimo's brief 1985 essay on myth and truth is included here because it so succinctly summarizes and illustrates the strand of his work for which he is most remembered today, namely *il pensiero debole* or "weak thought."

I first met Gianni Vattimo in January 1981, when he was visiting professor at Yale University, and I was completing my doctorate in comparative literature. Asked by his host department to teach a survey of early modern Italian philosophy to a group of literature graduate students, he dutifully complied, leading us through major and minor texts of the period in the original language, including works by Giordano Bruno, Tommaso Campanella, Galileo Galilei, and others. Gianni likely had not looked at any of these in at least two decades but took his pedagogical assignment seriously—far more so than was generally expected of visiting professors from Italy in those days, who often found the idea of a syllabus or term papers wholly alien. When certain books for the course were not available for students to consult in the university library, Gianni would return from one of his regular trips to Italy with photocopies to share with us (this was before the age of personal computers, the Internet, mobile phones, etc.). At the time he was in the midst of working out the premises of what would become known as "weak thought," and had already published a number of the essays that would eventually make up *La fine della modernità* (*The End of Modernity*, 1985). I doubt that nearly any of the Yale students had a clue about this: although early modern philosophy was far from what must have been on his mind that spring semester, he never let on.

Instead, in the seminar Gianni patiently elucidated for hours the key concepts of each early modern thinker without making any reference to Nietzsche, Heidegger, or any of his other philosophical touchstones. His fluency in the history of Catholic theology frequently came to the forefront, especially in regard to Augustine and Aquinas, as did his training in Latin, Greek, and German, but these were always only displayed by him when useful to the seminar discussion, not in order to impress us. His love of jokes and puns, often off-color, helped to lighten up the classroom atmosphere. Although the seminar was conducted in Italian, this might have been—although I don't know for certain—one of his earliest visiting professor appointments in the US, and his English was still rather rough around the edges. Before his jet-set years took him all over the globe, whenever Gianni wanted to speak in another language, he threw himself into the task uninhibitedly, with full confidence that he could manage to make himself understood, even when trying to convey complex philosophical concepts in a tongue that was not his and that he did not

yet command. This inherent lack of inhibition was in fact a key to understanding his warm and winning personality, not to mention his vast international circle of friends: Gianni was open to one and all and didn't let conventions, or taboos, or what others might think of him hold him back in expressing not only philosophical ideas, but his very being. He radiated a sense of radical intellectual and personal freedom that many of us in that seminar admired, although I later learned how greatly he had had to suffer personally in order to attain this freedom.

Our paths crossed often in the next few years—Turin, Paris, Milan, New York, Los Angeles—and we became friends. In 1986 he asked me to translate *La fine della modernità* into English for Polity Press in the UK, and I agreed to do it: this was to be his first book to appear in English. I spent the wintry spring of 1987 on a fellowship while working on the translation project in a friend's isolated stone farmhouse outside Volpaia, a tiny village between Florence and Siena, typing on a thirty-pound “luggable” Kaypro portable computer with my hands jammed inside woolen socks because there was no heat available after mid-April and my fingers were numb with cold. After completing the first draft, I found that I had a lengthy list of queries for the author and needed to talk them over with him in order to meet the tight deadline set by the British publisher for submission of the manuscript. By then Gianni had become so renowned that he seemed to be spending most of his life on airplanes; I wasn't at all surprised when he suggested that we meet at Linate airport, just outside Milan, where he would be between flights. One day in June we sat in the air terminal there, discussing the terminological issues that had arisen in my work on the translation, including certain inconsistencies between the various chapters of the original Italian text. Gianni's English had greatly improved, and he was very much at ease in discussing with me the philosophical jargon employed in the translation. He apologized for not having carefully systematized the chapters of *La fine della modernità*, which had been originally written as freestanding essays over a number of years. I told him that this was a good opportunity to do just that, to which he agreed, although it went against his nature to be overly concerned about the “final” state of any text of his. In fact, Gianni repeated several times to me a seemingly simple point: “wherever possible try to use *thinking* instead of *thought* to translate ‘*il pensiero*,’” he said in English. For him it was essential to emphasize in *The End of Modernity* that his postmodern philosophy was not a finished or complete object, but an activity always underway and forever subject to further revision—as, I now see clearly, the next three decades were to demonstrate. When we were more or less done with our review of my queries and his next flight was about to board, he turned to me and, smiling, sighed: “I remember translating a book by Gadamer, and by the end I hated the author. I just hope that you don't end up hating me.” Nearly forty years have passed since that day at the airport, and in all that time such an idea has never crossed my mind. Farewell, Gianni Vattimo: *addio!*

The following is a partial list of Gianni Vattimo's books in English:

- *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*. Translated by J. R. Snyder. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988.
- *The Transparent Society*. Translated by D. Webb. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.
- *The Adventure of Difference: Philosophy after Nietzsche and Heidegger*. Translated by C. P. Blamires and T. Harrison. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.
- *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*. Translated by D. Webb. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.
- *Religion*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

- *Belief*. Translated by L. D’Isanto and D. Webb. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
- *Nietzsche: An Introduction*. Translated by N. Martin. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- *After Christianity*. Translated by L. D’Isanto. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*. Foreword by Richard Rorty. Edited by S. Zabala and translated by W. McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- *The Future of Religion*. Edited by S. Zabala. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- *Dialogue with Nietzsche*. Translated by W. McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- *After the Death of God*. Edited by J. W. Robbins. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*. Translated by W. McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue* [with René Girard]. Edited by P. Antonello. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*. Edited by F. D’Agostini and translated by W. McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- *A Farewell to Truth*. Translated by W. McCuaig. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* [with Santiago Zabala]. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- *Being and Its Surroundings*. Edited by G. Iannantuono, A. Martinengo and S. Zabala. Translated by C. Federici. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021.