

Federico Vercellone. *Morfologie del moderno. Saggi di ermeneutica dell'immagine*. [The Morphology of the Modern]. Torino: Trauben, 2002.

Alessandro Bertinetto

Preview

[Book Review] Alessandro Bertinetto reviews Federico Vercellone. *Morfologie del moderno. Saggi di ermeneutica dell'immagine*. [The Morphology of the Modern]. Torino: Trauben, 2002.

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Federico Vercellone's book is an inquiry into the origin of modernity. The main thesis is that modernity loses its connection with nature and significance by virtue of its detachment from the continuity of the classical age. In modernity, the recovery of a semantic orientation implies a morphologic hermeneutics that Vercellone understands as a kind of therapy, a therapy which is pressing because of the end of a natural teleology. In opposition to classical antiquity, modernity is the age in which the dimension of value coincides with the dimension of novelty. The fact that novelty becomes the source of significance and meaning depends upon the double origin of modernity. The general frame of classical antiquity is a totality that is ruled by unchanging metaphysical-religious principles. By contrast, Vercellone—following Hegel and the German Romantics—identifies modernity with the *Romantik*, i.e. with the age of Christianity, deriving from the contrast of light and darkness, sense and non-sense. Vercellone studies this conceptual frame through a comparison between the Romantic thinkers (Novalis, Schlegel, Wackenroder) and the two most important defenders of the classical mentality in modernity, Goethe and Hegel. Goethe's morphology faces this issue in terms of a philosophy of nature. His theory of form reduces the infinite to the finite, finding the one *Urphänomen* at the basis of the never-ending natural metamorphosis. Hegel, on the other hand, works in terms of a philosophy of history: only the classical Greeks understood the world as a closed whole. For this reason art in this period achieves its perfection as a synthesis of spirit and matter, form and content, finite and infinite. Things change with Romanticism, as it breaks the harmonized totality of the classical world. Time becomes the genetic origin of the constitution of form and significance. In this way—so Vercellone argues—the connection between the Christian idea of an infinite cosmos and the Romantic idea of a progressive, infinite composition of artwork becomes evident.

Hence Romanticism thinks that the absolute of classical metaphysics cannot be captured under a conceptual point of view. Only art can present the absolute as a totality that cannot ever be totally present. This is also shown in the aesthetic concepts which Friedrich Schlegel opposes to beauty: irony, allegory, the sublime, the interesting, the ugly. Poetic form itself is secularized because ontology is now grounded in temporal discontinuity. Romanticism and modernity must be understood as ages of nihilism because being, according to the Romantic thinkers, shows itself only in and through allegorical images. Desire is the psychological dimension in which this Romantic me-ontology mirrors itself, a dimension which appears also in the expressiveness of Romantic art. Romantic art must expressively reveal a kind of psychological inclination, dismissing the universality of Winckelmann's classical

canon and opening the way to the mobile expression of dynamic modern nature, as Vercellone shows in a chapter dedicated to the interpretation of the Laocoon.

By virtue of these aesthetic and psychological concepts, Fichte and Nietzsche are posited respectively at the beginning and at the end of Romanticism. Fichte, following Jacobi's criticism of transcendental philosophy, would open the doors to nihilism as the age in which the world is reduced to the image of the subject. But Nietzsche's attempt to unify the classical dimension of eternal recurrence with the dimension of the will to power offers, according to Vercellone, a more mature account of nihilism, in virtue of which modernity reaches self-consciousness about the impossibility to conciliate its double roots: the Greek and the Christian.

Nonetheless, Romanticism's nihilistic and aesthetic legacy is not a relic of the past, as Vercellone shows in the last chapters of the book where important theses of the contemporary aesthetic-philosophical debate are discussed, for example, the ideas of Piero Gobetti, an Italian thinker and an antifascist of the last century. According to Gobetti, autonomy of form allows art to resist the tyranny of politics. There is also the anti-Crocian position of another Italian thinker, Lionello Venturi, who emphasized the dialectic between taste and artistic creation, renewing the Romantic account of the processual essence of form. The topic of secularization, which according to Vercellone is at the basis of the Romantic view of the world, is then studied in two chapters. The first engages Gadamer's criticism of aesthetic consciousness in relationship to the recent developments of contemporary aesthetics and in particular, Arthur Danto's "non-aesthetic aesthetics." The second concerns the commodification of artworks in the aestheticized world. Vercellone contends that in our contemporary age the artwork becomes, from one side, as Adorno showed, a market product. From the other side, industrial and market products become things we can aesthetically appreciate: (art)works. Hence wares becomes the major decoration of modernity.

The final thesis is that in our world the classical dimension paradoxically presents itself in a post-classical age. The contemporary world converts itself into a kind of museum and becomes itself an artwork. This aestheticization of the world should realize the promise of happiness which, according to Adorno, art expresses in contrast to brute life. However, if in this post-classical dimension we lose the connection with life, the only sphere of appearance, of image, would remain the proper sphere of art, and art could not act in the real world. Is this the last possibility for the modern subject, which allegedly loses the possibility to capture the meaning of things and which can therefore be defined only as a "subject without a predicate?" To answer this question, you are encouraged to carefully read the last chapter of Vercellone's book.

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