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**Sistema e ricerca in  
G. della Volpe: Sviluppo  
dell'estetica dell'avolpiana**  
By Ercole Romagna  
Napoli: Tempi Moderni, 1983

The first edition of Galvano della Volpe's *Critica del gusto* (1960) begins with the following statement: "In the present volume we attempt a systematic exposition of a historical-materialistic aesthetics, and therefore a methodic, sociological reading of poetry and art in general." The regenerating force of Della Volpe's thesis, within the framework of contemporary Italian Marxism, as well as the controversial and polemical character of his intellectual figure, made the *Critica del gusto* one of the most important texts of the debates in aesthetics in the Italy of the sixties. Della Volpe's book constituted within the Marxist perspective, the crystallization of a rupture in the hegemony of the idealistic positions which, starting from Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, were to become so pervasive throughout twentieth-century Italian thought. This was particularly evident in the field of aesthetics.

In the heat of polemics, most of the critiques of Della Volpe's aesthetics centered upon evaluations of its "results." Above all, they focused on the utilization of structural linguistics as a constructive instrument toward a "semantic aesthetics." In Della Volpe there would be, moreover, as a presupposition of his argument, a theory of the artistic sign as the specific locus of confrontation of the social dimension of art. Della Volpe's aesthetics was consequently pitted not only against idealism, but also against the "content oriented" (*contenutismo*) and "sociological" (*sociologismo*) approaches prevailing in Marxist aesthetics under the official title of "socialist realism" (*realismo socialista*).

Rather than concentrating solely on this last phase of Dellavolpean aesthetics, Ercole Romagna's book aims at reconstructing its genesis through the various concrete investigations which constitute the "range" of Della Volpe's thought. The goal is thus to offer an analysis of the final results of Della Volpe's aesthetics in the light of his thought process as a whole, not as an isolated case. Romagna sets out to achieve, also, a sort of "archeology" of Della Volpe's aesthetics, in the sense of showing the close relationship between his methodological and gnoseological positions and the development of his aesthetics.

A *Ricercatore* in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bologna, Romagna begins by tracing a phenomenology of the history of aesthetic ideas. In doing so, he follows the approach of Luciano Anceschi, for whom "the historiographies of aesthetic ideas," if they wish not to be reductive, must bear in mind "the complexity of the fields of inquiry, the multiplicity of intentions, the variety of the intentions that show themselves to be irreducible and which transform the field, the object, the notion within a network of meanings and relations." This methodological conception would be applied to the analysis of post-idealist Italian aesthetics by Lino Rossi (like Anceschi at the University of Bologna), in whose work one already finds the nucleus of the hypothetical interpretations developed later by Romagna when he states that the final "scientific disposition" of Dellavolpean aesthetics seems to stage research that precedes the Marxist phase within which it articulates itself, evidencing an undeniable historic-critical foundation. These are the central themes of Romagna's analysis: to demonstrate the complexity of the inquiries and the variety of its intentions and, from this, to trace the theoretical motives from the earliest stages of the intellectual process.

Romagna documents with rigor Della Volpe's many-sided fields of interest: he examines not only Della Volpe's *systematic* proposals, but also his historiographical works (the ones on Hegel, Eckhart, Hume, as well as Della Volpe's discussion/appropriation of specific aspects of Plato, Aristotle and Kant). Hence, we have the first interesting result: Della Volpe's recourse to specific formulations and moments in the history of philosophy is always brought about in an "instrumental" way, with the aim of integrating them as problematic issues in the construction of his own system of thought. This is something that sheds enough light, for example, on Della Volpe's attitude toward structural linguistics which is, Romagna observes (p. 266), utilized as an instrument in the model of aesthetic theory, yet not without a critical comprehension of its contribution.

The systematic aspect of Della Volpe's thought would thus be an integrating process of historical antecedents by means of different methodological instruments. The specific analyses would then function as points of partial opposition to the validity of the system in the distinct moments of its genesis.

Such a continual synthesis of philosophical unity and the plurality of historical situations and methodological responses to them is already present, in a gnoseological key, in the early Della Volpe, as Romagna shows. What we are offered is a deeper explication of his intellectual adherence to Marxism, as well as his conception of it. It is, in effect, Della Volpe's concern to recognize the positivity of the manifold, of the sensible, of materiality, without renouncing because of it the universalizing moment, to unification, concept and reason. Acknowledgment of the positivity of the manifold would lead to espousing a materialistic disposition, and from that to the necessity of integrating the historical event. At the

same time, the desire not to give up the universalizing moment of reason would explain Della Volpe's defense of Western science and philosophy, even in front of a system which could dissolve into simple pragmatism or a low-level historicism. This explains once again Della Volpe's polemic against the predominant historicism of Italian Marxism, above and beyond specific issues.

Romagna's work is commendable also for its reconstruction of Della Volpe's context, particularly the academic reception to his work. But it also is excessively modest in its global appraisal of Della Volpe's aesthetics, whose "genealogy" it so judiciously reconstructs. In his conclusion (pp. 306-07), Romagna speaks in fact of the impossibility in Della Volpe's aesthetics to dispense with the results obtained on the gnoseological plane. Similarly, Della Volpe cannot dispense with "progress" since it presumes (within historical materialistic aesthetics) that the arena of internal relations between art and society be situated in language (*lenguaje*) in a historically determined way. Romagna also deals with the internal limitation according to which the whole of the poetic and the artistic experience should be the object of a univocal consideration exclusive of poetry (and art) itself: this would indeed go against Della Volpe's alleged respect for the manifold character of experiences (in this case, the artistic one).

Regarding this last point, it is opportune to recall Della Volpe's theoretical effort to give validity, within the Marxist framework, to the avant-gardes. This was carried out at a time when the mere mention of the word "decadence" expressed with razor sharpness the inability of contemporary Marxism to understand the art of our times. By making recourse to linguistics as an instrument, Della Volpe is not blinded by the fact that for most of the avant-garde art is, above all, a

revolution in the language of the expressive forms of the arts.

In Della Volpe, finally, the problem of *cultural heritage* is of paramount importance, as it was within the other Marxist thinkers of the century: Lucáks, Bloch, the Frankfurt school and even Antonio Gramsci. Della Volpe's awareness of the cultural heritage is present in all the theoretical formulations of his work. The attempt at a systematic integration of historical events and of the diversity of Western intellectual contributions, which E. Romagna so clearly demonstrates in his book, responds likewise to the political and moral options available to the Marxist project, ever concerned at the level of both theory and praxis with responding to what is valid in the cultural tradition of the West. But if in German thinkers the highest point of development of Western culture tends to identify itself with either the philosophical tradition or art, in Della Volpe there is posited a third plane, that of science, as fundamental to culture. One could therefore ask up to what point some of the insufficiencies in Della Volpe's thought would not be coterminous with the historical moment of its genesis. I am speaking of the insufficiencies already present in European Enlightenment thinkers and also, later on, in many Marxist conceptions. In Della Volpe they could be summarized in his own conception of modernism as *self-consciousness of the dialectic of historicity and system*, of the dynamic and the permanent. This by itself excludes the fragmentary and the non-integrable according to the unifying principles of reason, of the logos. It excludes all that appears as a dispersive force for, or escape point from, a political and theoretical design aimed at unifying homogeneously the human

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[trans. by Giuseppe Di Scipio]

**Language as Work and Trade:  
A Semiotic Homology for  
Linguistics and Economics**  
By Ferruccio Rossi-Landi  
South Hadley, MS: Bergin and  
Garvey, 1983

After Marx and Engels outlined the four ontological characteristics of the relations of production in *The German Ideology*, they inadvertently fell upon a consideration which has been held up as a paradigm of contemporary thinking by philosophers and linguists alike, namely, that the material body of consciousness is language. Their insight was apt. They were trying to debunk the hegemony of the philosophy of consciousness that had reigned so eloquently in German thought since the *Aufklärung*. Alas, they were never able to deliver on this insight. Marx, whose idea this most probably was, was preoccupied with other things like getting beyond ideology and turning to the *real* foundation of things through the study of the system of Capitalism. Even if the book were published in 1846, one might surmise that this insight concerning language would not have been observed given the minimal development of the linguistics of the time. Certainly, Marx never took the idea up again. One doubts he could have developed the idea given the state of the art at that time. This, of course, does not take away from the brilliance of the insight even though it occupies a mere paragraph in a massive corpus. Certainly, for those who study contemporary German philosophy it must be classified as precursor of those current attempts to move from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language.

If Marx could have developed this insight taking advantage of the advances in both contemporary linguistics and analytic philosophy, what