

VATTIMO AND LITERARY UNDERSTANDING:
AN ESSAY ON RECENT HERMENEUTICS

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The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the postmodern hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo offers a new interpretation of history that challenges conventional accounts of the modern period and promotes a new kind of literary understanding. In *The End of Modernity*, originally published in Italian in 1985, Vattimo interprets the modern age in terms of the "overcoming of metaphysics" as announced by Heidegger and as anticipated by Nietzsche. This particular discussion offers a basis for determining the basic traits of "postmodern" thought and provides an alternative to Hegelian historiography. Hence, by opposing the strong interpretation of historical periods, Vattimo's "weak thinking" questions the dominance of modern categories and suggests how the renewal of hermeneutics can be linked to a deeper interpretation of modern literature. Nevertheless, Vattimo's contribution to hermeneutics cannot be clarified apart from the broad issue of what defines *the modern* as a historical concept.

The problem of assigning the modern period an approximate date of origin is complicated in view of the possibility that the term "modern" may not possess a definite historical meaning. Even greater confusion can arise when a single historical event is identified with the origin of modern, as opposed to pre-modern times, rather than broadly considered in terms of various concerns that reveal something fundamental about the human condition.

Intellectual history has long emphasized the centrality of Descartes to the development of early modern philosophy and science. The discovery of the *ego cogito*, through which a new conception of philosophy was ushered into the world, is often assumed to have been a purely intellectual occurrence. However, this special event is difficult to separate from the direction of general history. Perhaps a given intellectual attitude can provide us with a kind of access to historical reality. Certainly the radical nature of the Cartesian revolution is an aspect of the modern age, insofar as the emergence of the *ego cogito* is the intellectual counterpart to other sorts of occurrences. If this is in fact true, then an intellectual revolution of the greatest importance is only imperfectly understood in isolation from other sorts of events. By the same token, a more basic history might cast light on an intellectual event, notwithstanding the value of formal and synchronic analysis.

The possible relationship between intellectual and general history could be sustained on the basis of a new concept of history that includes intellectual occurrences. The meaning of Descartes and Cartesianism is not exhausted in the moment of Descartes. On the contrary, the distinctively modern concern with the subject acquires clearer meaning in conjunction with the moment of Descartes, just as the moment of Descartes can be better understood in terms of a general but all-pervasive concern for subjectivity. It is difficult, however, to assign a precise historical location to this early modern concern, insofar as the framework of the *ego cogito* seems to exclude historical research.¹ Surely Descartes's project is unalterably opposed to any possible "leap" into historical reference if the concept of reference can be used to displace the *ego cogito* as an original point of departure. Once again, therefore, the difference between intellectual and general history seems to place both forms of history in opposition to one another, rather than in meaningful conjunction.

The hermeneutical concept of a historical "reading" places the opposition between both forms of history in a productive framework. Certainly the notion that distinct forms of history can be studied as parallel to one another already begs the question. For instance, if intellectual history or general history is assumed to have priority over other forms of history, then the category of meaning acquires primary and derivative significance. However, the very concept of a reading relativizes the difference between intellectual and general history, as an ideal set of opposites.

The concept of a reading refutes the idea that intellectual history is composed of detachable, eidetic moments.² On the other hand, this same concept relates intellectual history to general history in a way that preserves various possibilities of interpretation, some of which are more abstract than others, and also prevents general history from collapsing into diverse forms of cultural reflection.

Furthermore, the very concept of a historical reading questions the idea that history can be understood in terms of familiar oppositions. The opposition between the two kinds of history is "metaphysical" in the sense of giving priority to idea or reference, as opposed to material or social possibilities. On the contrary, the concept of a historical reading would allow the truths of history to be related to the experience of the text, as opposed to the real or imaginary unity of any given period.³ The concept of a reading, therefore, disputes the unity of history as a "metaphysical" contrivance. By establishing the difference between a dominant discourse and a recalcitrant history, it argues on behalf of discontinuity and conflict in interpretation.

The concept of a reading might be considered in terms of the event of modernity as an identifiable occurrence. As a herald of modernity, Descartes symbolizes the birth of modern philosophy as a new adventure in intellectual history. However, this new adventure requires certain his-

torical preconditions. Hannah Arendt attempts to identify some of these major preconditions by linking the concept of "world alienation" to the origins of the modern age as such: the discovery of the *ego cogito* was preceded by the confiscation of Church property and the expropriation of the peasantry, as an unforeseen consequence.⁴ The philosopher who doubts is thrown back on subjectivity as a final refuge from radical instability. Arendt does not locate the birth of the modern age in the flow of general history toward a predetermined goal, or even in a remote event of uncertain importance. The easy assumption that her insight (which was at least anticipated by Max Weber) has a purely "economic" significance is quickly dispelled:

It is, of course, idle to speculate on what the course of our economy would have been without this event, whose impact propelled mankind into a development in which all property was destroyed in the process of its appropriation, all things devoured in the process of their production, and the stability of the world undermined in a constant process of change. Yet, such speculations are meaningful to the extent that they remind us that history is a story of events and not of forces or ideas with predictable courses.⁵

The view that history is more like a story of events than a procession of ideas or a collection of forces refutes "idealism" and "historicism" alike. While Arendt is willing to locate the birth of the modern age in a central event of overwhelming importance, her discussion of this event takes place within an unusual framework. History is more like a text than it is like a philosophical meditation or a system of causes. This means that we might actually "read" the text of history in order to discover new developments and recurrent structures.

Arendt maintains that world alienation lies at the beginning of the modern age and constitutes modernity as an attitude and experience. Its importance is linked to the very nature of history as a story of events, insofar as modern occurrences invariably take place in a peculiar setting. The setting of the modern age is, in fact, anything but "worldly" in the usual sense of the term.⁶ Historians are not incorrect, but rather somewhat misleading in utilizing the word "secularity" with reference to the birth of the modern period. The term itself usually signifies a positive consolidation, as well as the beginning of a critical reappraisal of theological systems and opinions. Nevertheless, Arendt actually invites us to reconstruct the origins of modernity in a destabilizing process, rather than merely in the intellectual signposts of modernity itself. This very process can be identified with "secularization," only if the term itself can encompass an experience of radical instability and ceaseless change.

Arendt's reading of modern history in terms of world alienation almost inevitably leads to the problem of metaphysics, insofar as the moment of transition between late medieval and early modern times

obviously implies a contrast between rival systems. The relative stability of medieval theology might be contrasted to the "overcoming of metaphysics" as a much more recent theme.⁷ But the transition from late medieval to early modern times cannot be understood in terms of a mere substitution of intellectual models. The meaning of this signal event is irreducible to the passing of metaphysics and the rise of modern philosophy. The change in question does not result in a more stable or more evident accomplishment, but in the introduction of unprecedented instability. The "ground" that falls away in the early modern period is both theological and economic, metaphysical and historical. While early modern philosophy attempts to establish thinking on a new foundation, it also testifies to the historical nature of widespread destabilization.

Within the hermeneutical tradition, Heidegger provides a description of our own time as an age in which the ground has fallen away, and thereby underscores the transitional nature of modernity itself. It is no longer possible to identify the decline of metaphysics with the upsurge of a positive spirit, certain of its path and fully conscious of its heritage. Instead, nothing remains stable under the feet of the modern traveller who no longer approaches solid ground as he moves into an open future:

The ground is the soil in which to strike root and to stand. The age for which the ground fails to come, hangs in the abyss. Assuming that a turn still remains open for this destitute time at all, it can come some day only if the world turns about fundamentally—and that now means, unequivocally: if it turns away from the abyss. In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured.⁸

Nevertheless, this "fundamental" turn away from the abyss cannot in any case result in the recovery of metaphysical hope or the sudden fulfillment of antique promises. The metaphor of the abyss expresses the nature of modernity itself, as realized in the moment of Hölderlin or Rilke. The "in-between" moment registers the passing of an age in each instance: just as the unity of the aesthetic in Romantic and post-Romantic art is problematized by Hölderlin and Rilke respectively, the moment of transition is most authentically experienced in terms of a personal and artistic crisis.⁹ Heidegger attempts to alert us to the dimensions of this crisis when he dramatizes a recurrent situation in which the collapse of metaphysics comes to coincide with the arrival of a new period of uncertainty.

Heidegger's "overcoming of metaphysics" is announced in an earlier context in which the general problem of art and artist becomes an invitation to an extended meditation. "The Origin of the Work of Art" becomes important in its many versions as a criticism of the way in which *Being and Time* is commonly misinterpreted. The resolve of *Dasein* should not be interpreted in terms of the philosophy of the subject and the metaphysics of the will.¹⁰ Hence the critique of modern aesthetics could not be complete without a cautionary word on the true meaning of *Entschlossenheit*:

The resoluteness intended in *Being and Time* is not the deliberate action of a subject, but the opening up of human being, and of its captivity in that which is, to the openness of Being. However, in existence, man does not proceed from some inside to some outside; rather, the nature of *Existenz* is outstanding standing-within the essential sun-dering of the clearing of beings.¹¹

This brief passage is noteworthy for two basic reasons. First, it questions "the deliberate action of the subject" from the standpoint of fundamental ontology, rather than in terms of a mystical regard for the Being of beings. Second, it relates this deliberate action to the opposition between inside and outside, as the mark of metaphysics. *Dasein* has the capacity to "overcome" metaphysics as a derivative mode of understanding.

It would be wrong to assume that Heidegger's attempt to "overcome" metaphysics possesses philosophical implications alone. Gianni Vattimo's engaged discussion of Heidegger's language provides an especially useful commentary on the historical content of a recent controversy. Heidegger's *Verwindung* is not an "overcoming" that initiates an entirely new epoch in human history, nor does it involve the "sublation" of a traditional accomplishment.¹² Instead, it helps explain how recollection and even distortion are combined whenever a given historical epoch attempts to develop its own self-conception. The modern age does not "overcome" metaphysics once and for all in the manner suggested by Hegelian dialectics or specified by positivist historiography. Modernity is not the sudden emergence of a new order but a complex process in which past and present mingle in unpredictable ways. Although it can be examined in terms of intellectual accomplishments, the process under consideration can also be considered in historical terms. Vattimo provides an explanation for *Verwindung* which communicates the element of delay and non-linearity in the event of modern history:

The history which we recollect has itself the structure of the *Verwindung* of recollection and distortion. This may appear to be a very abstract generalization, but it is no longer so if we translate *Verwindung* into a term which is much more familiar to historians of Western civilization, namely the term 'secularization': I am thinking here of Max Weber, but also of Norbert Elias and of René Girard.¹³

This discussion of *Verwindung* should be related to the nature of history as a literary and artistic concern. Since historical reference no longer guarantees the stability of history, the "dated" nature of many literary *motifs* no longer binds discourse to specific periods. Within the aesthetic context, Vattimo observes that Heidegger's interpretation of "earth" in terms of mortality commits him to a neoclassical, as opposed to a classical, theory of art.¹⁴ Thus Heidegger's concept of art actually surpasses the Modernist belief in the *work* as a tribute to historical mastery. Vattimo indicates that Gadamer's discussion of art is quite unlike that of his great precursor:

The final pages of *Truth and Method*, where Gadamer describes the *kalon*, are entirely dominated by a reversion to a metaphysics of light and, more generally, of the splendor of form. Gadamer's words seem to take us far from the idea of the work of art as an ever-open conflict between world and earth which Heidegger proposes in his essay on "The Origin of the Work of Art."¹⁵

For Vattimo, Gadamer's inability to interpret *Verwindung* as recollection and distortion is symptomatic of his retreat from the full implications of Heideggerian poetics. Vattimo suggests how, in this retreat, Gadamer's failure to develop a new reading of history finally emerges when the question of artistic truth ceases to be considered in terms of the hermeneutical critique of aesthetic consciousness.¹⁶

It might be objected that such a reading would be difficult to sustain, in view of the problems that the concept of *Verwindung* would necessarily pose for historical research. The notion of distortion, in particular, seems to bear scant relevance to the normal meaning of evidence. Nevertheless, Vattimo would not want the historian to reject manifest "distortions" in the interests of obtaining pure and undistorted truth. The historian does not obtain a distorted view of things by accident, or on account of a failure in method. Distortion is already introduced into the substance of history, insofar as metaphysics continues to live and die in a human world. In matters of art, this helps show how the experience of mortality need not intensify the fullness of the word, but constitutes a weakening and an approximation to the figure of death as a diminution of Being.¹⁷ Heidegger's use of the example of the Greek temple in "The Origin of the Work of Art" at least suggests how historical research might acquire cogency through an awareness of finitude as an aesthetic occurrence.¹⁸

Hence it would be highly misleading to interpret the "distortion" implicit in *Verwindung* in a negative way, as if to emphasize the inadequacy of later periods to correctly appropriate metaphysical truths. The "weakening" of Being does not begin with secularization, but only assumes a new form in the early modern period. This weakening does not imply that Being has somehow become invisible or inaccessible to research. On the contrary, the weakening of Being can be experienced in terms of concrete works of art, as well as in terms of the historical presence of entire periods.

Walter Benjamin helps us understand the concept of "distortion" in terms of an original experience, rather than as a derivative and debased form of perception: "The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera, as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement before one's own image in the mirror."¹⁹ The very marketability of the photograph or film actually testifies to the ineradicable nature of an original distance. The endless repetition of a single image only seems to abolish a fundamental distance in space and time. The "disenchantment" of the work in the age of mechanical reproduction

may stem from an original inadequation, as well as from modern conditions themselves.²⁰ This would have to imply that the weakening of Being is less of a historical accident than a clue to the meaning of historical time as an "aesthetic" event.

Nietzsche's early criticism of common interpretations of the historical process, as well as his later discussion of the relationship between art and politics, largely anticipate "weak thinking" as a commentary on history. Hence Nietzsche's polemical relationship to a certain form of Hegelianism emerges in this context as a "deconstructive" reading. The very concept of a *Zeitgeist* has been completely abandoned, insofar as the unity of any given period is no longer implied in signal cultural achievements:

The relationship between a genius and his epoch is the same as that between strong and weak, as that between old and young: the epoch is always relatively much younger, less substantial, more immature, less sure of itself, more childish.²¹

This passage clearly presents an unstable image of the historical period in the attempt to offset the more prevalent conception of history as the "ground" for cultural activity in general. The passage also presents a relatively stable image of the artist as a "late-comer" to history, rather than as the most recent expression of a fresh circumstance. But this passage does not have entirely conservative implications. Surely a weakening of Being is implied in the idea of a non-relation between artist and period, aesthetics and its time. The weakened relationship between them helps constitute a new reading of history.²²

Certainly one of the most important implications of this new reading concerns the identity of literary periods. In view of the fact that the weakening of Being implies a non-relation or at least a discontinuous relation between artist and period, the conventional interpretation of cultural history must be put in question and completely modified. Particularly in the case of literary history, the new reading would allow us to challenge the unambiguous use of period labels in much traditional criticism. If history itself compares to a text, then the literary text becomes the unique "site" of a deconstructive poetics: the literary period explodes as a unity and the (written) text bears witness to historical diversity.²³ Hence it is no longer possible for the responsible critic to situate the literary text within the movement of a single history. The identity of a given period is a questionable hypothesis and cannot sustain the text as a stable entity.

A text such as Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, for example, becomes a far more interesting literary experience when examined in terms of a complex history, rather than from the standpoint of any given period. This unique novel offers many remarkable insights to someone who approaches literary history as a discontinuous field of experience. The controversy

cerning the unity of periods was taken up in the light of a concrete challenge, and the "archeology" of the postmodern text emerged as a contribution to literary understanding.

1 For Husserl, Descartes inaugurated a new epoch when he sought to ground philosophy in the pure *ego cogito*. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), p. 4. Such an absolute grounding, however, would privilege science over history unless formulated in terms of absolute idealism. Needless to say, Descartes would not have been able to consider the Hegelian option.

2 In this special context, the term "eidetic" suggests the role of essential intuition in pure phenomenology. The term does not have an entirely abstract meaning. Husserl does emphasize, for instance, the importance of "bodily" selfhood in essential intuition. See Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, section 3, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (London: Collier Books, 1969), pp. 48-50. However, Husserlian phenomenology is difficult to reconcile with the demands of historical understanding insofar as the philosophical subject (transcendental or otherwise) always tends to emerge as a monadic construct.

3 Heidegger offers a definition of metaphysics that is consistent with the one proposed here. While this definition fails to suggest how the text of history can be read non-metaphysically, it does indicate how metaphysics consolidates an age:

Metaphysics grounds an age, in that through a specific interpretation of what is and through a specific comprehension of truth it gives to that age the basis upon which it is essentially formed. The basis holds complete dominion over all phenomena that distinguish the age.

Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 115.

4 Arendt's empirical reference to the expropriation of the peasantry is "accidental" in relation to historical intentions. However, this seemingly fortuitous event acquires a far-flung historical meaning when considered by Max Weber and others.

5 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 252.

6 Arendt's discussion of "world alienation" relates social and economic expropriation to a historical process which deprived settled communities of all worldly advantages. She strongly argues that this alienation is misinterpreted whenever we identify the "secular character" of the modern age with "worldliness" as a positive concept. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

7 The expression "overcoming of metaphysics" is relevant to all of Heidegger's work, early and late. For Heidegger, metaphysics cannot be "overcome" as long as thought remains trapped within the framework of representa-

tion. Heidegger's conception of metaphysics as an "onto-theology" applies pre-eminently to Hegel, but it also specifies how the deity enters philosophy and determines its history as the difference between Being and beings. However, the thinking of this difference requires a "step back" into the unthought rather than a dialectical *Aufhebung*. Heidegger's confrontation with Hegel in "The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics" can be found in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 42-74.

8 Martin Heidegger, "What Are Poets For?" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 92.

9 Heidegger's interpretations of Hölderlin and Rilke challenge the use of period labels as signs of aesthetic integration. He suggests that each poet dramatizes the transitional meaning of Romantic or Modernist literature. Hence the literary period is a differential concept, and its aesthetic meaning is irreducible to the unity that may or may not be an aspect of the literary work.

10 The concept of the Open, which derives from Rilke, plays an important part in Heidegger's later thinking. However, even in his early work, Heidegger insists that "resolve" is not a purely subjective experience. The certainty of resolve is not primarily an affair of consciousness, nor does it imply personal inflexibility, but involves an attitude of openness:

Such certainty must maintain itself in what is disclosed by the resolution. But this means that it simply cannot *become rigid* as regards the Situation, but must understand that the resolution, in accordance with its meaning as a disclosure, must be *held open* and free for the current factual possibility.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, II.3.62., trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 355.

11 Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 67.

12 Heidegger employs the concept of *Verwindung* in a number of his later publications. The term becomes crucial in the lecture entitled "The Principle of Identity," which precedes a more detailed discussion of Hegel's onto-theology. In Joan Stambaugh's translation, "a transformation of the frame" [eine *Verwindung des Ge-Stells*] links the "event of appropriation" [Er-eignis] to a new relationship to technology. See Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, pp. 37, 101. Such a transformation presumably opens up the post-metaphysical situation. Vattimo emphasizes how *Verwindung* as a critique of identity thinking is relevant to "the end of metaphysics" as understood by both Heidegger and Nietzsche:

For Heidegger, as for Nietzsche, thought has no other "object" (if we may still use this term) than the errancy of metaphysics, recollected in an attitude which is neither a critical overcoming nor an acceptance that recovers and prolongs it.

Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Chapter 10, trans. Jon Snyder (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) p. 173.

13 Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Chapter 10, p. 179.

14 Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Chapter 4, p. 74.

15 Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Chapter 8, pp. 142-143.

16 Hans-Georg Gadamer's attempt to retrieve the question of artistic truth is skillfully developed subsequent to his critique of modern aesthetics in *Truth and Method*, Part I.1.3., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald C. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1991), pp. 81-100. For Vattimo, however, the historicity of art yields to aesthetic "timelessness" when Gadamer discusses the *kalon* in *Truth and Method*, Part III.3.c., pp. 477-479.

17 Vattimo, Chapter 4, p. 74.

18 The example of the Greek temple links the concept of the work of art to the presence of the deity as the vehicle of poetic utterance in Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 41-44.

19 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), p. 230.

20 Max Weber emphasized how economic conditions in combination with religious developments resulted in the "disenchantment of the world" (rather than the work of art) in his classic study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parson (New York: Scribners, 1958).

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 97.

22 As precursors of weak thinking, Nietzsche and Heidegger both anticipate postmodernity in their mutual challenge to traditional ontology and its stable world of meaning:

For only if we take seriously the outcome of the 'destruction of ontology' undertaken by Heidegger, and before him by Nietzsche, is it possible to gain access to the positive opportunities for the very essence of man that are found in post-modern conditions of existence.

Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, Introduction, pp. 11-12.

23 In his important "Différance" essay, Derrida alludes to Heidegger's use of the word "site" in an intense meditation on the meaning of translation. See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 153-160. While Derrida acknowledges Heidegger's indebtedness to Greek tradition, he also maintains that the site connotes a promise instead of instituting a cult; it refers to the divine but belongs to no special theology or doctrine. The crucial passage can be found in Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 145.

24 Michel Foucault employs "archeological" analysis in order to test the limits of representation, particularly with respect to the discontinuous nature of discursive practices. Insofar as the *ego cogito* is defined solely in terms of its capacity to name or represent, it tends to efface the difference between language and discourse. While suggesting that historical unity is a questionable hypothesis, Foucault's description of the emergence of the early modern *episteme* has important hermeneutical implications:

Henceforth, the primary Text is effaced, and with it, the entire, inexhaustible foundation of the words whose mute being was inscribed in things; all that remains is representation, unfolding in the verbal signs that manifest it, and hence becoming *discourse*.

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, ed. R. D. Laing (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 79.

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