

Alison Ross. *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy.*
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The thesis of this book is clearly stated in the introduction: “the thinking of Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy can (and perhaps in a significant sense must) be understood as ways of addressing the *problem of presentation* as framed by and inherited from Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*” (4). Ross identifies in Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy a fundamental “aesthetic attitude” that leads them to “steer philosophy in an aesthetic direction” (1). The same aesthetic attitude that characterises Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, that is, the “search for a satisfactory mode of relation between the forms of material nature and human freedom,” which results in an aesthetic use of language, becomes the framework for these thinkers’ approach to philosophy. Ross argues thus that this “aesthetic steering of philosophy” is best understood as an “adaptation of the specific and technical employment of the notion of presentation [*Darstellung*] in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*” (1).

First *presentation* must be defined: in Kant’s third *Critique* it is “the name he gives to the problem of how to define a mode of relation able to reconcile freedom with the constraints of materiality. The exigency of this relation follows from the need of finite beings to render in aesthetic or sensible forms what would otherwise be impotent, errant ideas” (2). Presentation is thus the name Kant gives to the mode of relation between the intelligible and the sensible. “Representation” (*Vorstellung*) is defined by Kant in terms of the schematising powers of the subject, its powers of appercep-

tion. These powers are however unable to provide a moral, comprehensive orientation for the self. "Presentation" [*Darstellung*] suspends the claims of the subject's powers over material forms and "inquires instead about the 'favours' that the subject enjoys and that are extended to it by the material forms of nature" (3). It thus allows, for Kant, for a comprehensive orientation of meaning. The specific field of experience where this meaning is to be sought is neither cognitive nor practical, but aesthetic. The problem of aesthetic presentation is thus made more fundamental than any ontological issue.

Ross argues that Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy "generalise" the characteristics Kant had given to the aesthetic – still a specific mode of experience within a typology of different spheres – and bring them to "bear on things in general" (4). But why focus specifically on these thinkers? The aesthetic features of experience described by Kant underpin, as Ross notes, a number of theoretical positions within modern philosophy: critical theory, for example, uses the aesthetic for projects of social criticism (cf. Adorno); other examples are Lyotard's use of the category of sublime, Derrida's founding his deconstructive project on the indeterminacy of meaning deriving from Kant's third *Critique*, the nineteenth-century notion of aesthetic *Bildung* as basis for political projects (cf. Schiller); even Marxist theory depending "on the aesthetic dimension of experience in order to discharge the function of criticism as well as to model an alternative anthropology and the social arrangements that could support it" (7). The influence of Kant's third *Critique*, which first credited aesthetic experience with critical capacity, is well known and documented. However, according to Ross, Heidegger's, Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's paths to philosophy are crucially different from the aforementioned examples: the question raised in the *Critique of Judgement* becomes in these thinkers – and in them only – the "core problem for philosophical thinking" (8). Their respective philosophical projects can thus be read *through* the Kantian question of presentation. Presentation, though, no longer refers in these thinkers to the sensibilisation of ideas, but rather to the problem of the construction of the meaning of sensible experience without the armature of ideas. The problem of presentation is thus re-oriented from the coordination of sensible forms and ideas to the problem of the immanent articulation of the meaning of experience. The originary site of experience of meaning is identified by these thinkers in art or literature, hence, Ross argues, their reflection on the topic of presentation engages in an "aesthetic steering of philosophy" (166).

Another issue accompanies Ross' investigation: the question of Kantian presentation is seldom connected to the enormous interest in the category of the aesthetic that frames important themes in movements as differ-

ent as hermeneutics, deconstruction, and phenomenology. Moreover, Kant tends to be considered a negative figure in the literature on Heidegger and French deconstruction. Ross' goal is thus to fill this gap and contrast this assumption in secondary literature. Therefore, the book, first, argues for the general claim that the Kantian topic of presentation is an enduring topic within contemporary European thought, and, second, attempts to show in a new light, through the topic of presentation, the work of Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy.

The book develops in three parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first part examines the stakes of the problem of presentation through a reading of Kant. The two chapters of this part focus respectively on the two parts of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, "Critique of Aesthetic Judgement" and "Critique of Teleological Judgement." Aesthetic presentation is identified in Kant as the characterisation of man's practical being as a moral being. As a consequence, the person with a moral disposition is seen as an aesthetic object; thus the problematic of aesthetic presentation in Kant's philosophy is defined as a "moral-aesthetic anthropology" (60). Ross concludes putting forward the argument that "Kant's *Critique* undoes its aim of presenting moral subjectivity by casting this subjectivity in the form of an aesthetic object" (12).

The second part is devoted to a reading of Heidegger through the question of presentation, which is identified not merely as a theme among others, but rather as the reflective impulse that drives and structures Heidegger's thinking. Ross argues that Heidegger, in rethinking the Kantian topic of presentation, intensifies aesthetic experience in the direction of a primary ontological relation to being (61). Chapter three analyses Heidegger's reading of Kant and interprets his "turn" [*Kehre*] as a consequence of the discovery of the topic of presentation in Kant's third *Critique*. Chapter four focuses on Heidegger's analysis of the artwork and of technology as a consequence of this reading of Kant and thus as an analysis on the relations of presentation.

The third part devotes one chapter to Lacoue-Labarthe and one to Nancy, strongly relying on their relationship with Heideggerian thought. Like Heidegger, and following his impulse, these thinkers consider the question of presentation as the key question of thinking. However, unlike Heidegger, they are faithful to the context of aesthetic in which Kant first posed this question. Chapter five interprets presentation as the chief orientation in Lacoue-Labarthe's approach to philosophy in aesthetic terms. The intelligibility one finds in aesthetic experience is given a foundational status as a resource for the definition of philosophical concepts. In particular, Ross reads Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of Heidegger's "inadequate analysis of presen-

tation” as the consequence of a notion of the political as the founding of an identity able to precede and guide presentation, and which will end up in his notorious engagement with National Socialism. Chapter six argues that Nancy’s philosophy can be considered a radicalisation of Heidegger’s theses on the work of art, which is used as a generic account for his ontology. Here again reflection on aesthetics forges a vocabulary able to capture the genesis of meaning and thus to deal with ontological problems. The crisis of meaning in our era thus is taken up as the breakdown of the metaphysical coordination of ideas and sensible forms.

The book concludes – albeit a bit too briefly – by identifying the limits of this approach to philosophy: outside this aesthetic “path,” the projects of Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy are difficult to follow. The topic of aesthetic presentation constitutes the privileged direction in which these thinkers orient their ontology, but it also engenders constraints and obscures any other possible path of thinking. Moreover, within this path it seems difficult to reach a point of resolution: “there is no end to the problem of presentation” (167). “Other paths are open to philosophy,” Ross concludes, but this is a topic for other books.

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