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Recensioni

Alberto Bonchino, *Materie als geronnener Geist. Studien zu Franz von Baader in den philosophischen Konstellationen seiner Zeit, Baaderiana*, vol. I, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2014, pp. 169; Franz von Baader, *Jugendtagebücher 1786-1793. Mit Vorwort und kritischem Kommentar, Baaderiana*, vol. II, a cura di Alberto Bonchino e Albert Franz, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2017, pp. 224; *Aufklärung und Romantik als Herausforderung für katholisches Denken, Baaderiana*, vol. III, a cura di Alberto Bonchino e Albert Franz, Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh, 2015, pp. 254.

Franz von Baader (1765-1841) is not a very well-known philosopher. In fact, «philosopher» is an incomplete characterization, at least according to our standards. After studying medicine, he – like many Romantics – studied mineralogy and worked as a mining engineer in his native Bavaria. In 1810 he developed a new method for manufacturing glass, which earned him a conspicuous prize from the Austrian Emperor Francis I. A liberal catholic with theocratic inclinations, Baader gave a significant contribution to the project and the ideology of the Holy Alliance Treaty. For some, his rich, convoluted and fragmentary works deserve a place not only in the history of philosophy and mysticism, but also in the history of science. His thinking could not be set in motion – Walter Benjamin once noted – «without an electric machine, a few Galvanic batteries, some scholastics, definitely some mystics, and a few volumes of Kant's works». Many of his writings are a curious mixture of doctrines and observations and often resemble Renaissance books of magic: cryptic allusions abound, mysticism and experimentalism go hand in hand, and theories are confirmed by appealing to an ancient forgotten tradition (*prisca sapientia*).

Baader played a fundamental role in the birth of *Naturphilosophie* in Germany, and his physical and chemical investigations had a remarkable impact on Romantic scientists such as Ritter and Schubert. Profoundly anti-Cartesian, he opted for a third way between Schelling's «naturalism» and Hegel's «idealism», striving to

reconcile the two approaches. He did so in large part by rediscovering, re-interpreting and recombining more or less subterranean traditions such as German mysticism (from Meister Eckhart to Jacob Böhme), Renaissance magic and hermeticism, alchemy (most likely Paracelsus), eighteenth-century theosophy (Friedrich Ch. Oetinger, Louis C. de Saint-Martin) and Jewish and Christian Cabala. No wonder August W. Schlegel dubbed him «Böhmius redivivus». Themes such as magnetism, original sin, matter, love, and androgyny have all been originally explored by Baader, whose thought has been described as a *summa* of Christian esotericism.

Reading his works – according to his friend the protestant theologian Rudolf Rocholl – is like «flying through an obscure, rain-swollen cloud, from which a dazzling flash of lightning suddenly shoots out». In recent years, thanks to the work of Alberto Bonchino, our knowledge of this obscure cloud and its impact on 19th- and 20th-century European culture has greatly increased. Bonchino – an Italian scholar based in Germany – is Research Associate at TU Dresden and is currently working on a critical edition and commentary of a selection of Baader's works. Together with Albert Franz, Professor Emeritus of Catholic Theology at the same university, he is editor of the series *Baaderiana*, published by Ferdinand Schöningh (Paderborn), which so far has produced three volumes (listed here in chronological order): a study by Bonchino entitled *Materie als geronnener Geist. Studien zu Franz von Baader in den philosophischen Konstellationen seiner Zeit* (vol. I, 2014); a collection of essays, edited by Bonchino and Franz, entitled *Aufklärung und Romantik als Herausforderung für katholisches Denken* (vol. III, 2015); a critical edition of Baader's early diaries, edited by Bonchino and Franz (*Jugendtagebücher 1786–1793. Mit Vorwort und kritischem Kommentar*, vol. II, 2017). I will discuss them in this order.

Bonchino's *Materie als geronnener Geist* is a masterly reconstruction – in line with the best *Konstellationsforschung* – of the intellectual climate of Baader's time and of the intricate web of problems, ideas and personal relationships in which his thought took shape. The first part of the book focuses on the idea – central in Baader – of matter as «coagulated spirit» and convincingly traces its intellectual origins through a journey that leads from Böhme to the German reception of Frans Hemsterhuis passing through – among others – Saint-Martin, Kleuker, Herder, Dalberg, Jacobi and Schelling. According to Bonchino, Baader's most likely source for the expression «coagulated spirit» is a work by the German diplomat and philosopher Karl Heinrich von Gleichen. Roughly put, the idea is that there is only *one* substance that, at a lower level, takes on the characteristics of material bodies, and, at a higher level, those of a spiritual reality. The exterior surface of nature – dominated by

mechanistic forces – is in reality the spatio-temporal solidification of an inner, dynamic and primeval «fluid». Earthly life is a perennial tension between a tendency to inertia and crystallization and a tendency to fluidity, but it is important to point out that such tension is waiting for its final resolution: then – in a sort of alchemical eschatology – all nature will be re-generated and all matter will be liquefied into spirit.

The second part of the book is a fascinating exploration of the fortune of German *Naturphilosophie* and the re-emergence of mystical, magical and theosophical traditions in nineteenth-century France and especially in the works of Honoré de Balzac. The protagonists of Balzac's novels – especially *La Recherche de l'Absolu* and the *Études philosophiques* – tragically oscillate between inwardness and exteriority, heaven and earth, and constantly strive to recompose a lost unity between matter and spirit. *La fin* – we read in *Louis Lambert – est le retour de toutes choses à l'unité, qui est Dieu*. Baader is mentioned only once by Balzac, but the analogies and the affinities between the two are profound, as Bonchino shows: they can be explained, on the one side, by their common interests (Renaissance hermeticism and alchemy, French and German mysticism, Mesmerism, spiritism) and, on the other, with the diffusion and reception of Baader's and Schelling's thought in France during the first half of the 19th century. Particularly interesting is Bonchino's treatment of the presence of the ancient theme of androgyny in Baader and Balzac. For both, the androgynous is the symbol of humanity's «celestial prehistory», namely of an angelic, virginal state of completeness and loving fusion with God that preceded the Fall and the rupture of the cosmic unity. In Balzac's *Séraphita*, the androgynous embodies, in its purity, the possibility of a final return to such state: by claiming back its celestial nature, humanity will at the same time re-generate the cosmos itself, liberating it from its fallen, fragmented and materialized condition.

The third part of the book deals with early Romantic geology and specifically with the contribution of Abraham Gottlob Werner to the development of German *Naturphilosophie* between 1788 and 1799. Werner taught mineralogy at the Freiberg Mining Academy from 1775 to 1817. Among his students were Baader, Alexander von Humboldt, Novalis, Steffens and August von Herder (Herder's son), whose early investigations were deeply influenced by the personality and teachings of Werner. However, the young Romantics – Bonchino writes – «began their speculations precisely where Werner would suspend his own» (p. 158): they turned his geological and mineralogical interests into a metaphysical vision of nature as an enormous organism whose inner dynamics and stratified history mysteriously reflected the soul's life and cosmic drama.

Materie als geronnener Geist is the result of a prolonged immersion in the original texts. Bonchino's extensive knowledge of the subject and command of secondary sources, his curiosity and subtle historical sensitivity, his impatience toward disciplinary partitions, and his interest in the disorienting wanderings of ideas make this book something very different from the tedious compartmentalized tome typical of certain academic historiography. Bonchino navigates the murky – if not bewildering – universe of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century esotericism with absolute confidence. He also shows its impact or unsuspected influence on twentieth-century philosophy, psychology, literature and historiography (one hopes he will expand on this very interesting subject).

I have a couple of remarks to make. First of all, if it is true that Baader rejected the equation of matter with evil typical of certain gnostic and cabalistic traditions, I do not believe that his conception of matter can be qualified – as the author suggests by relying on Ernst Bloch – as «fully positive» (p. 63). If this were so, Baader would not have argued for the necessity of its eschatological transfiguration. To what extent, one may ask, can those who view the corporeal in its *present* state as imperfect and aspire to its *future* re-generation be said to be free from the gnostic prejudice they claim to oppose?

Secondly, Bonchino hints at the contribution of *Naturphilosophie* to the development of nineteenth-century science (a problem much discussed among historians of science) and rightly insists on the «thin, but indissoluble link» that, in Baader's times, fruitfully united «philosophy and mysticism, physics and physiology, and medicine and charlatanerie» (pp. 124-25). He also points out that, more generally, science's course is not «linear», but always proceeds against a «murky background» (p. 97). It is hard to disagree. Bonchino, however, does not elaborate on the post-Romantic fate of such «indissoluble link» within or without the domain of science. Three things, I believe, should be emphasized here. (1) As documented by many studies, encounters or interactions between certain domains of science and various spiritual, mystical and esoteric currents – especially in the field of theoretical physics, and particularly in the German Neoromantic milieu – have indeed taken place (and continue to do so today). To what extent these interactions did (or do) really affect the content and the methods of the exact sciences remains an open question. In any case, the fact itself should give pause to those who equate science with the embodiment of pure rationality. (2) A mixture of philosophy, science, magic and mysticism of the kind we find in Baader is much easier to encounter today among occultists who manipulate scientific knowledge to corroborate their beliefs than among scientists. (3) In the past two centuries, esoteric-mystical traditions or ideas have become an in-

tegral part of a – still ongoing – *revolt* against the modern world, namely against science, technology, and often democracy.

The impact of animistic, anti-mechanistic, and often reactionary stances of much Romantic science can be clearly seen in all the three phenomena just listed. Taken together, they tell us that the need for an esoteric-mystical *integration* or *rejection* of science would not be felt had science not become something very different from magic and mysticism. In fact, it has become a source of frustration for their age-old spiritual ambitions. In other words, the «indissoluble link» has been gradually *severed*. As an interesting case of re-emergence of the tradition at the center of his work, Bonchino mentions, without commenting on it, physicist Hans-Peter Dürr's conviction (pp. 76-77) that matter is «coagulated spirit» and that «quantum physics» and «transcendence» are not in conflict, but complement each other. Another physicist, Enrico Giannetto (whose studies on Baader are quoted in this volume) believes that the non-mechanistic image of nature conveyed by twentieth-century physics, genetics, molecular biology, and complex systems theories is «a new form of the archaic conception of Nature as a living and animated organism, as a divine great mother» (*Scienze della Natura e Scienze della Persona: la Natura come Persona*, in *Scienze della persona: perché?*, ed. by G. Bertagna, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2006, pp. 211-17). My impression is that these statements, rather than illustrating modern-day physics' state of the art, have much more to do with a set of very human and rather unscientific aspirations: reenchanting the world, placating existential anxieties, accommodating fashionable trends, bridging the painful gap between the «self» and the «cosmos», reconciling «faith» and «reason», or reinforcing all-encompassing theories.

Aufklärung und Romantik als Herausforderung für katholisches Denken testifies of the current revival of scholarly interest in the thought of Baader and of the contribution of Bonchino and Franz to it. This collection of essays (17 in total) originated from an international conference the two organized in Dresden in October 2013. The book is divided into four parts. The first has an introductory character: Franz stresses the importance of the study of Baader's thought and its reception from a historiographical, philosophical and theological standpoint; Bonchino makes the sadly necessary point that German philosophical culture between the 18th and 19th centuries cannot be reduced to the names of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel and shows that a critical edition of Baader's works is, in this sense, fundamental to grasp the background and the roots of German Romanticism and Idealism; Damir Barbarić discusses the legacy of *deutsche Romantik*, especially as regards views of nature, soul, and art. The second part deals with Baader in the context of *Naturphilosophie* and Catholic the-

ology: Stefano Poggi explores Baader's early physical and chemical investigations and their relationship with alchemical and esoteric traditions; Gian Franco Frigo places Baader's *Naturphilosophie* in the context of the reaction to the mechanistic picture of the world and of the attempt to transform the scientific study of nature into a «sacred physics»; Katharine Weder's essay is an in-depth study of Baader's reception of Mesmerism and animal magnetism. On the theological side, Joris Geldhof deals with Baader's theory of sacrifice and its relevance for today's eucharistic theology; Günter Kruck discusses Baader's concept of Christian philosophy in light of contemporary theology; Eckhard Fülus explores the little-known presence of Baader in the writings of the Dadaist Hugo Ball. The third part of the book focuses on the relationship between Baader and mysticism. Miklos Vetö and Ferdinand Van Ingen deal with Jacob Böhme, Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann with Saint-Martin, and Thomas Rentsch with Meister Eckhart. The fourth part of the volume addresses the place of Baader in the context of German Idealism: Paul Ziche focuses on Baader's peculiar combination of rationalism and theosophy and its fortune among Baader's immediate followers; Jörg Jantzen and Claudio Ciancio discuss the relationship between Schelling and Baader, while Hanjo Sauer stresses the importance of the notion of «mediation» (*Vermittlung*) in the thought of Baader.

This volume is a rich, well-structured and in-depth exploration of Baader's thought in the context of his time and its diversified reception. Coming from different backgrounds, the authors display a variety of approaches: historical, philosophical, and theological. Sometimes the laudable attempt to rescue Baader from oblivion seems to rely on the well-oiled, but shaky argument that his «thought» – namely carefully-selected aspects of it – «anticipated» current philosophical or theological problems or may *still* offer tools for their solution. Even in such cases, however, the tone is rarely devotional or rapturous. The book contains both less and more than its title (perhaps a bit misleadingly) appears to suggest: the focus is less on *Aufklärung* than *Romantik*, and the chapters offer more than a discussion of Baader from a Catholic perspective. In fact, this will prove to be an indispensable tool for all categories of historians interested in Baader and in the roots of German Romanticism and Idealism.

The second volume of *Baaderiana* – and the last to be discussed here – is a critical edition of Baader's early diaries from April 12, 1786 to April 10, 1793. These private notes were not destined for publication: they first appeared in 1850 – nine years after his death – in the eleventh volume (edited by Emil A. von Schaden) of the *Sämtlichen Werke*. Bonchino and Franz follow the text established by David Baumgardt in 1928 and add an extensive commentary

indispensable to grasp Baader's many cultural references and allusions. The timespan covers Baader's early studies, his aborted career as a physician, his first contacts with the masonic milieu, his studies of chemistry and mineralogy, and the first part of his stay in England. The notes convey the emotionally-charged atmosphere of the *Sturm und Drang* together with Baader's intense religiosity. The influence of – among others – Herder, Klopstock, Wieland, Lavater, Hemsterhuis and Saint-Martin is also evident. The diary is not only an intimate and fragmented *Bildungsroman* of sorts, but also one of the earliest expressions of German Romanticism and one of the pinnacles of journal literature of the second half of the 18th century.

Baader's notes are an exercise in self-observation, where philosophical or mystical speculations are often triggered by ordinary events: on April 13, 1786, the peace of mind instilled by a glass of wine leads him to reflect on the soul's capacity to transcend time and space and on its eschatological destiny (p. 21). The soul's «eternal striving» (*ewiges Streben*) for perfection is *by itself* evidence of its immortality and perennial desire to be reunited with God (p. 18). As with the study of nature and its laws, so the exploration of one's spiritual depths discloses the presence of God: man, spirit, nature and God are all connected. The flower – Baader writes (p. 20) – shines and blooms when it turns toward the sun, but withers as light is replaced by darkness. The same happens to the spirit: when it turns toward its divine source, it is filled with light, truth, goodness and heavenly bliss; but when it forgets God, it wanders and fades together with the earthly shadows it was chasing. This is not just poetic symbolism: these processes, for Baader, happen in accordance with *the same* «eternal physical laws».

The direction of Baader's thought seems to be already set in these early notes. A constant eschatological preoccupation underpins his investigations and worldview: he looks at the objects of his interest through the lenses of soteriology. Thoughts and feelings are somewhat divinized and acquire a universal explanatory power. Baader was well aware of his anthropocentric standpoint: we should understand what surrounds us through ourselves – he repeated with Saint-Martin – *not* ourselves through what surrounds us (p. 56). He was horrified at the thought of an unbridgeable gap between spirit and nature: «Is my spirit so isolated, separated and random in all its activities as commonly assumed?» – he asked himself (p. 20). His self-reassuring answer is that of all the mystically-minded: «No!».

Martino Rossi Monti