

# Italian Philosophical Aesthetics : A New Generation

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To chart, however schematically, the main trends in Italian aesthetics, represented by the younger generations of scholars, is no easy task : the cultural picture in Italy in the last twenty years is unquestionably far richer and more complex than in the past, when the predominance of a few major trends of thought made affiliations more definitive and easily identifiable. Alongside the lineages of two or three schools of aesthetics, more historically significant by virtue of the number of their pupils and the extensiveness of their cultural activity—the Turin school, deriving from Banfi, and the Bologna school, generated by that of Milan through Luciano Anceschi— the Italian panorama appears rich in new departures not always easily traceable to a single matrix; and rich above all in its dialogue with authors and themes from other nations. At the same time, true to characteristics of Italian philosophical culture and Crocean legacy, there is, besides research activities of prevalently theoretical type, where priority is given to the conceptual analysis of aesthetic theories, and the bounds of vision and method often extended towards an idea of aesthetic thematics as settings for a non-sectorial, non-special philosophy, a wide research sector in the field of the history of the various aesthetics and poetics. A notable case in point are the numerous scholars affiliated to the University of Bologna who are engaged in the work, inaugurated by Luciano Anceschi, of an historical and philological reconnaissance of poetics, institutions and literary genres.

The grouping by philosophical areas, whose distinguishing features I shall attempt to delineate, should be taken as an essentially orienting ordering principle, and identifying device; for the truth of the matter is that every scholar expresses a plurality of facets, if only by virtue of the open and ongoing nature of his research. What also needs stressing is the incompleteness of this map, setting out, as it does, to chart those areas, at times particularly fecund and important for the rigour and originality of their research styles, that do not always coincide with the main university centres of aggregation of the discipline. In my account I have given pride of place to trends and positions that achieve the most interesting and philosophically stimulating results, and thus to those scholars who are less concerned with historical and philological reconstructions than with analysing the theoretical aspects of the problems from a *philosophical aesthetic* standpoint.

## 1. Geographical and intellectual affinities

A very interesting case of a group of scholars who, from a substantially similar cultural background, have found themselves developing different perspectives, all of which nevertheless share common interest in theoretical themes originating in Nietzsche, are those teaching at the Veneto universities of Padua and Venice. The best-known exponent is Massimo Cacciari, whom it would yet be grossly reductive to consider "simply" as an aesthetologist. Cacciari, *enfant prodige* of Italian culture since the early Seventies, whose current interests lie more in the direction of theory and theology than of aesthetics, is certainly one of the most vigorous, original and erudite thinkers on the contemporary scene. Many fields have been the object of Cacciari's reflections: town planning; the themes of *finis Austriae* and the "culture of crisis"; the philosophies of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein; poetry, music and painting; the question of the technical rationalization of politics and questions of contemporary economics. The publications belonging to this phase of Cacciari's passionate quest are: *Krisis. Saggio sulla crisi del pensiero negativo da Nietzsche a Wittgenstein*<sup>1</sup>, *Pensiero negativo e razionalizzazione*<sup>2</sup>, *Dallo Steinhof, Prospettive viennesi del primo Novecento*<sup>3</sup>. Questions of geographical and cultural "frontier" are what Cacciari deals with, and he examines them with a view to drawing a theoretical profile of a possible central European cultural heritage, from which he seeks bearings on the catastrophic hairpin bends of late modernity. It is an inquiry which, whilst losing nothing of its radicality and passion, has in subsequent years focussed its attention ever more markedly on figures and moments in modern art and philosophy, considering them as ciphers of constitutive problems, such as those of representation, language and limit. This occurs in *Icone della Legge*<sup>4</sup>, through mathematics, painting and music (Mondrian, Malevic, Florenskij, Freud, Kafka, Rosenzweig); and in *Angelo necessario*<sup>5</sup>, a fascinating reading of the figure of the angel as hermeneut of the invisible, and thus crucial gnoscological question, through texts and images ranging from Jewish, Christian and Iranic antiquity, to Klee, Rilke, Corbin and Benjamin. In this way the aesthetic is certainly a horizon, but one of many, one which a philosophical investigation in recent years increasingly concerned with ontological and gnoscological questions<sup>6</sup> has been conducted.

A line of research which, in the 70s and 80s, comes very close to Cacciari's, is that of Giangiorgio Pasqualotto and Giorgio Franck, who originally belonging to the *area* of Nietzschean studies, have subsequently concerned themselves with aesthetic themes. After *Avanguardia e tecnologia. W. Benjamin, M. Bense e i problemi dell' estetica*<sup>7</sup> and various studies devoted to theme of ideology, such as *Pensiero negativo e civiltà borghese*<sup>8</sup>, Pasqualotto has increasingly followed

a path leading from little understood aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy to the study of affinities traceable between certain expressions of Western philosophy and fundamental concepts of Oriental thought<sup>9</sup>, so that today he devotes himself to comparative aesthetic studies, and Zen aesthetics in particular<sup>10</sup>. Giorgio Franck, for his part, is an interesting example of the new, highly theoretical aesthetics, Nietzschean in background as well, and interesting himself in Walter Benjamin<sup>11</sup> an author who has attracted many valid scholars - with *La passione della notte*<sup>12</sup> Franck goes in quest of "the fugitive centre of thought", removed from the world of light of the philosophical idea which from Plato onward has dominated the West, in so far as it is the legitimate origin of every discourse and action. In his book Franck's favourite interlocutors, Nietzsche, Blanchot, Levinas, vie as questioners around the principle in order to isolate that nocturnal "remainder", which the Platonising insistence on knowing neglects, or discards in the insignificance of the irrational, these themes recur in *Esistenza e fantasma. Ontologia dell'oggetto estetico*<sup>13</sup>, this time in a succinct philosophical analysis of the philosophical paradox represented by the aesthetic 'thing': on the one hand insignificant, opaque corporeity, empty and neutral, inconspicuously existent; on the other hand, threshold towards new significances and new possible worlds. The object as image is shadow, idol, double, thingness akin to death, in that every work appears, in reality, only as the disappearance of the object. The event that occurs in the aesthetic object is not a coming to light, therefore, but a disappearance in the image: it is, rather, that the existence of a phantom is silhouetted in the "other night", in that abyss of exteriority, spoken of by Blanchot, out of which images come.

Finally, since he belongs to the same geographical and cultural area, mention should be made of Franco Rella, one of the most active scholars of the last twenty years. Rella's interests range from the avantgarde movements to Benjamin, Rilke and painting. In recent years he has represented a variant of that revival of the beautiful which has characterized Italian aesthetics<sup>14</sup>. the intention behind his position, articulated in *Bellezza e Verità and L' enigma della bellezza*<sup>15</sup> is to reconstruct a sort of alternative history of the beautiful in Western culture, from Heraclitus, Plato, Neoplatonism and Sohrevardi the Persian to Proust and Simon Weil the deliberate assumption of the perspective of modernity, with the acceptance of all the differences that finally make them visible, allows Rella to trace the presence of the beautiful "as form that manifests its dissent", or in other terms, that insoluble terribleness or disharmony of which many poetic and visionary experiences are a testimony, but certain philosophies too. A beauty as dismemberment and paradox, and thus the objectivization of the infinite in a finite figure, or truth in the guise of appearance, fragment, enigma, or that "void"

which aesthetic modernity discovers in the interstices of representation, and which allows it to push back the confines of the world, entering ever new spaces. Here too aesthetics turns its attention towards truth rather than the conventions and rules of a subjectively conceived artisticity.

## 2. Hermeneutic plurality

As we have seen in the Veneto area, young Italian aesthetics often finds sustenance in authors and problems of such a kind as to call into question a strict disciplinary identification, if not aesthetics itself in its status a specialist knowledge. And this is also the case with those scholars whose research has been polarized by an interest in the thought of Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, or by psychoanalysis, hermeneutics or the theme of the sublime. A particularly significant example of a new eagerness on the part of aesthetics to converse with other research experiences, is provided by the studies of Giorgio Agamben, an author of refined interests, in whom an original result is produced by the marrying of aesthetic thought Benjaminian in character with the nervous fibre of a not always explicit psychoanalytic, as well as with a Warburghian philological method. Working with particular attention to style (the title of one of his writings is *Idea della prosa*<sup>16</sup>, Agamben analyzes the themes of the modern destruction of experience<sup>17</sup>, of language as it is linked with death<sup>18</sup> and with the phantom<sup>19</sup>, pursuing a sort of topology of the unreal, enacted through examples drawn from different periods and areas of culture. Associated with the field of Benjaminian studies there are also young scholars of notable theoretical interest such as Fabrizio Desideri<sup>20</sup>, Mario Pezzella<sup>21</sup> and Bruno Moroncini<sup>22</sup>.

In the context of an aesthetics that is at once strongly theoretical in character, Kantian in approach and semiotic in its sympathies, Pietro Montani, one of the group of Emilio Garroni's pupils, deserves mention, as one of the most interesting Italian scholars of aesthetics. Combining an interest in the theory of historical avantgarde cinema (he is responsible for the Italian edition of Eisenstein and Vertov), an interest in poetic and literary semiotics with a no less intense interest in Kant, Heidegger and Gadamer, he has provided interesting studies on the concept of the self-reflecting character of poetic language examined in a fruitful dialogue with the most vital orientations of contemporary aesthetics, and with hermeneutics in particular<sup>23</sup>. Leonardo Amoroso belongs to a similar and allied area, Kantian and Heideggerian in approach. His solid skills in the field of the history of aesthetics, but above all his theoretical rigour and vigour make him an extremely significant figure. Though belonging to none of the main schools of aesthetics, and essentially theoretical in approach, Amoroso has studied the themes of communications, with reference to transcendentalism, existentialism, hermeneutics and semiotics, but also the thought of Heidegger, of whom he is

one of Italy's most acute interpreters<sup>24</sup>. A line that could legitimately be defined as hermeneutic includes the latest generation of pupils of the Turin school: Gianni Carchia, Roberto Salizzoni, Maurizio Ferraris, Federico Vercellone, all of whom are engaged in a survey of the ontologico-hermeneutic themes from German romanticism - based on Sergio Givone's relevant studies<sup>25</sup> - to American deconstructionism<sup>26</sup> and the now widespread aestheticization<sup>27</sup>, via the history of hermeneutics and Derrida<sup>28</sup>. These have a good claim to be considered the most conspicuous and academically representative sector of the hermeneutic emphasis in aesthetic research.

But of course, over and above these ideal or actual groupings, the trends in Italian aesthetics in the most recent generations are far more variegated and plural, and often coincide with the singularity of individual research styles, as in the case of Franco Restaino's treaty on *The History of Modern Aesthetics*, (*Storia dell' estetica moderna*, Utet, Torino 1991) and the identification of themes and of peculiar paths followed by an intellectual formation ever less traceable to the common matrix of major schools, even when it is possible to trace a line of distant descent. Emblematic of this are those aesthetologists gravitating around the Lombard universities of Milan and Pavia : in the case of Milan, mention should be made of the phenomenology derived line which, through the teaching Dino Formaggio, links up once more with Banfi, with his most recent descendents and their interest in romanticism and French aesthetics (Gabriele Scaramuzza, Stefano Zecchi, Elio Franzini)<sup>29</sup>, in the case of Pavia (Luisa Bonesio), it is important to note the connection, echoing Banfi, of theoretical suggestions deriving from Nietzschean and Heideggerian philosophy, but also contemporary French speculation (above all as it relates to the theme of philosophical writing and the sublime) and an interest in Oriental thought.

### 3. A Window on the East

A more restricted, but no less significant, sector of Italian aesthetology has concerned itself with the study and comparativist encounter with Oriental traditions. The most representative figure in this area is Grazia Marchiano, who has devoted herself to the investigation of the forms of Oriental aesthetic thought, initially from a comparativist perspective, acquired in India at Visva-Bharati University (between 1969 and 1972), and deriving from the method and work of Ananda Coomaraswamy<sup>30</sup>, but extending also to the masterly investigations of scholars such as the Japanese Isutzu and the French iramologist Corbin, who "have taught us to deconstruct speculative, literary, artistic and imaginal syntaxes of culturally distant works and systems", in volumes like *Il codice della forma*<sup>31</sup>, *L'armonia estetica. Lineamenti di una civiltà laotziana*<sup>32</sup>. Questions of symbology, metaphysics and interpretation

are dealt with in works such as *La parola e la forma*<sup>33</sup> and *La cognizione estetica tra Oriente e Occidente*<sup>34</sup>, while in more recent years Marchiano's interests have extended to the Far East, with studies on the aesthetic of miniature gardens, and on the relation between nature and artifice in Taoist and Zen aesthetics.

Her subsequent studies reflect new openings and new research possibilities (for example, a particular attention to themes of creativity, of virtual worlds and imaginal universes)<sup>35</sup>, along with an indefatigable and extremely dynamic activity in cultural organisation, directed above all at the establishment of permanent relations between the various world aesthetic centres<sup>36</sup>, and particularly at the setting up of bilateral exchanges between the universities of Siena and Kyoto, and the foundation of an international Centre of "East and West" Humanist Studies. All this testifies to a realisation that today more than ever it is indispensable to go beyond the historical limit of the classical Greek identification of Western aesthetic culture, to recognise the co-presence of various inflections and multiple departures in the field of aesthetic reflections. The expansion and hegemony of the Western model constitutes a phenomenon which has cut deeply, and more often than not laceratingly, into the fabric of other cultures; to remain remote from and inaccessible to Western *Ratio*. This is the backdrop against which the urgent and by now vital task is being carried forward in the attempt at a mutual "translation", however paradoxical and problematic, of cultural languages, even in such a discipline as aesthetics.

## Notes and References

1. Feltrinelli, Milan 1976
2. Marsilio, Padua 1977.
3. Adelphi, Milan 1980.
4. Adelphi, Milan 1985 (2).
5. Adelphi, Milan 1986.
6. Cacciari's most recent, sizable book is *Dell'inizio*, Adelphi, Milan 1990.
7. Officina, Rome 1971.
8. Guida, Naples 1981.
9. *Il Tao della filosofia. Corrispondenze fra pensieri d'Oriente e pensieri d'Occidente*, e pensieri d'Occidente, Pratiche, Parma 1989.
10. *L'estetica del Vuoto*, Marsilio, Padua 1992.
11. Mention should be made of his contribution to *Critica e storia*, ed. Franco Rella, CLUVA, Venice 1980.
12. Feltrinelli, Milan 1982.
13. Feltrinelli, Milan 1989.
14. In this regard, mention should be made of S. Zecchi's book, *La*

- bellezza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1990, an attack against the theses of aestheticization and the avantguard movements, in the name of a romantic experience of the world.
15. Feltrinelli, Milan 1990 and 1991.
  16. Feltrinelli, Milan 1985.
  17. *L'uomo senza contenuto*, Rizzolia, Milan 1970; *Infanzia e storia*, Einaudi, Turin 1978. Agamben is also the editor of W. Benjamin's *Works (Opere)*.
  18. *Il linguaggio e la morte*, Einaudi, Turin 1982.
  19. *Stanze. La parola e il fantasma nella culture occidentale*, Einaudi, Turin 1977.
  20. *W. Benjamin, il tempo e le forme*, Editori Riunti, Rome 19.
  21. *L'immagine dialettica. Saggio su Benjamin*, ETS, Pisa 1982.
  22. *W. Benjamin e la moralita del moderno*, Guida, Naples 1984.
  23. *Il debito del linguaggio. Il problema dell' autoriflessivita estetica nel segno, nel testo e nel discorso*, Marsilio, Padua 1985; *Il linguaggio, is senso e l'esemplarita ermeneutica della poesia*, "Documenti di lavoro" of the Centro internazionale di Semiotica e Linguistica (International Centre of Semiotics and Linguistics), Urbino 1988.
  24. His most important studies in aesthetics are *Senso and consenso Uno studio kantiano*, Guida, Naples 1984 and *L' estetica come problema*, ETS, Pisa 1988. Besides numerous contributions on Heideggerian thought, particularly on its relation with Holderlin, it should be recalled that Amoroso is translator and editor of M. Heidegger's *Erlauterungen zu Holderlins Dichtung (L poesia di Holderlin*, Adelphi, Milan 1988).
  25. *Ermeneutica e romanticismo*, Mursia, Milan 1983; *Dostoevskij e la filosofia*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1984; *Storia dell' estetica*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1988; *Disincanto del mondo e pensiero tragico*, Il Saggiatore, Milan 1989; *La questione romantica*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1992.
  26. M. Ferraris, *La svolta testuale. Il decostruzionismo in Derrida, Lyotard, gli "Yale Critics"*, Unicopli, Milan 1984.
  27. Cf. the anthology of essays of AA. VV., *Immagini del postmoderno*, with introductory essays by P. Portoghesi and M. Ferraris, CLUVA, Venice 1983, and F. Vercellone's study, *Pervasivita dell' arte. Ermeneutica ed estetizzazione del mondo della vita*, Guerini, Milan 1990.
  28. M. Ferraris, *Postille a Derrida, Rosenberg & Sellier*, Turin 1990 and *La filosofia e lo spirito vivente*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1991.
  29. Of Gabriele Scaramuzza's writings see, particularly, *Le originidell' estetica fenomenologica*, Antenore, Padua 1976; *Banfi, la rigione e l'estetico*, CLUEP, Padua 1984; by

- Stefano Zecchi, *La fondazione utopica dell' arte*, Unicopli, Milan 1983; *La magia dei sagi*, Jaca book, Milan 1984 and *La bellezza*; Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1990; by Elio Franzini, *Il mito di Leonardo*, Unicopli, Milan 1984 and *Le leggi del cielo*, guerini & Associati, Milan 1990.
30. Grazia Marchiano has been an important go-between for the Italian reception of Ananda Coomaraswamy, of whom she has translated and edited *La trasfigurazione della natura nell' arte (The Transformation of Nature in Art)*, Rusconi, Milan 1976, *Come interpretare un' opera d'arte (Why Exhibit Works of Art?)* Rusconi Milan 1977 and *Aforismi (Aphorisms)*, Stile Regina editrice, Rome 1988. Mention should also be made of *L' invito alla lettura di Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, *Abstracta*, September 1988. Numerous works by Coomaraswamy have been translated into Italian, including, in the field of aesthetics, *Introduzione all' arte e alla motologia dell' India*, La Salamandra, Milan 1984 and *Il grande brivido. Saggi di simbolismo e arte, (Traditional Art and Symbolism)*, Adelphi, Milan 1987. It is not however, inaccurate to say that this availability of his works on the Italian publishing scene has not been matched by an analogous willingness to subject them, and particularly the aesthetic studies, to a salutary comparative treatment (which has, for that matter, been the case with Corbin as well).
31. Dedalo, Bari 1968.
32. Dedalo, Bari 1974. Aslo : *The Power of Ornament in Ritual and Art*, "Saras Research", Monograph Reprint Series, nos. 4-5, 1984, *Reading*; the special number of *New Observations*, no. 64, 1989, New York, devoted to Hindu Aesthetics"; *'La voie de l' Occident et la voie de l' Orient'*, in *Melanges della "Revue d' Esthetique"*, *Homage a Mikel Dufrenne*, no. 21, 1992.
33. Dedalo, Bari 1977.
34. Guerini e Associati, Milan 1987.
35. *La creativita. Le base poetiche della mente*, Riza, Milan 1988; she is also editor of *La religione della terra. Vie sciamaniche universi immaginali, iperspazi virtuali nell' esperienze sacrale della vita*, a collection of writings in honour of E. Zolla, Red, Como 1991.
36. *Le grandi correnti dell' estetica novecentesca, (Major Trends in Twentieth Century Aesthetics)*, Guerini e associati, Milan 1991 (Proceedings of the international conference at the University of Siena, May 1990). Grazia Marchiano also coordinates a CNR research project concerned with the exploration of the "Oriental Renaissance" in eighteenth century Europe.