

Orientations of Phenomenological Aesthetics in Italy: The Encounter with Marxism and Semiotics

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The interest in phenomenology promoted in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century by Edmund Husserl, found its first advocate in Italy in Antonio Banfi (1886-1959). Professor of Philosophy at the University of Milan, as early as the 1920s Banfi introduced Husserl to Italian culture, at that time dominated by Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile.

In *La fenomenologia pura di Edmund Husserl e l' autonomia ideale della sfera teoretica* (1923), Banfi makes perfectly clear what separates phenomenology from Croce and Gentile's idealism¹.

The ideal transcendent forms in the movement of thought, at the basis of Croce's doctrine, come in for the young Banfi's criticism no less however than the same *a priori* essences (*eide*) at the centre of Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*.

What Banfi does is to have phenomenology interact with Kantian neoplatonism, emphasizing the problems of the relation between *essences*, understood as autonomous entities utterly distinct from the empirical events whose meaning they constitute, and *transcendental consciousness*. According to Banfi, such a problem should be placed on the plane of its immanent resolution. During the period he spent in Berlin (1910-11), his critical attitude towards Husserl accompanied a deeper exploration of Hegelian thought and Simmel's relativism.

The main task of phenomenology, wrote Banfi in 1939, is the construction of a universal system, open to the infinite, and capable both of offering knowledge a principle of integration and theoretical development, and of justifying and regulating the supply of ever new and more profound elements to knowledge itself.

In the 1920s texts and particularly in *Filosofia della vita spirituale* and *Principi di una teoria della ragione* (1926), Banfi sees in experience the field of the incessant relations between self and world, subjectivity and objectivity. They are the ideal poles of the world of culture which express themselves concretely in the spheres of art, morality and religion. Each of them acquires autonomy in relation to the others according to its own synthetic principle, which is universal and rational, and is thus connected to the regulating principle of

human experience, which is the principle of reason. According to Banfi, *rationality* does not define the field of experience *a priori*, but rather identifies its most profound meaning and value.

No less relevant is the distinction between *aestheticity* and *art* developed by Banfi in *Il principio trascendentale dell' autonomia dell' arte*. *Aestheticity* (*L'esteticità*) is the way of the transcendental understanding of experience. Its object is to seize the unitary meaning of life and of the life of art, integrating and correlating its concrete forms of realization².

Here is measured the entire rejection of neoidealistic theories which re-propose the problem of the definition of art. In Croce as in Gentile art assumes its specific value only in relation to the general movement of thought, to the place art occupies in the Spirit. In *Estetica come scienza dell' espressione e linguistica generale* (1902) Croce's definition of art as intuition places art in the realm of the circularity of the life of the Spirit (art/philosophy; economics/ morality) as its first moment of expression, totally outside conceptual reflection. In relation to such general criteria, it was thus possible for Croce to reach the point of distinguishing within Dante's *Divine Comedy* -but this was to become the general criterion of Crocean criticism - what is *poetry* from what is *not poetry* (*La poesia di Dante.*, 1920) devaluing precisely those specific and technical aspects of the life of art, like literary and artistic *genres*, which he considers mere conceptual instruments that discredit true artistic intuition, the lyrical expression of feeling, as such *ineffable* and *untranslatable*.

Gentile's position too -synthesized in the *Teoria generale dello Spirito come atto puro* (1916) and *Filosofia dell' arte* (1913)- outlined the idea of pure art as a quid *that* is elusive and inseparable from the spiritual *act* in all its complexity. Consequently, the same absolute theoretical concept of the *pure act* is responsible for the devaluation of the element of theoretical and technical reflection which, according to Banfi, belongs to the artistic outlook, and other spheres of human activity³.

Banfi is not interested in defining a philosophical *system*, but in linking it to a method that makes it possible to analyse and integrate the data of experience. The definitions of art offered by neoidealism such as *intuition* and *ineffability* are consequently called strongly into question. The general meaning of philosophical aesthetics, as it is identified in *I problemi di una estetica filosofica* (1932), does not, then, consist of defining what is art, but in stressing *the idea of aestheticity* as an autonomous rational principle.

The artistic experience occurs within the dynamic tension between subject and object, self and world⁴.

In Banfi's subsequent works an increasing importance is assumed by the notion of *World*, seen as the syntheses of experiences consisting of moments of theoretical reflection and technico-pragmatic solutions. The evaluation of artistic activity and the incidence on it of theoretical reflection highlight the *heteronomous* moment of art, in other words the cultural and social context in which it was produced.

In the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, Banfi supported Marxism, stressing the *social* aspect of art in his aesthetic system⁵.

In the Italian cultural panorama between the two wars the confrontation with Croce along Marxist lines had, in point of fact, already been initiated by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). As Eugenio Garin has authoritatively emphasised⁶, a continuous dialogue with Croce's positions runs through Gramsci's entire cultural activity, and is not just limited to the careful analysis contained in *Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce*⁷. This in no way detracts from Gramsci's originality of thought, but rather highlights one of its peculiar features: the theoretical and combative commitment to the present, in opposition to the dominant cultural positions: the latter are to be discussed, integrated and never rejected out of hand.

Nicolo Machiavelli's notion of *effectual truth* (*verita effettuale*), factual truth, (see *Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo stato moderno*), acts in Gramscian thought as a model for inspiring concrete effectual choices, in consideration of a *new culture*⁸. The criteria guiding such choices apparently owe a great deal to Crocean reflection. Indeed, Gramsci himself emphasizes the value of Crocean historicism, even if he then focusses on its idealistic reduction, against which he insists on the need to realise a *philosophy of praxis*, where man's economic life and concrete labour are the priority realms. But to do this, what we need is a new type of intellectual whom Gramsci describes in *Gli intellettuali specialista Politico*: a man capable of freeing himself from the rhetoric of empty abstract discourse and of pointing a concrete way to a new model of society.

In the sphere of literary analysis Gramsci bestows *radically new meanings* on the Crocean concepts of *form* and *content*: *form* becomes synthesis of language, and *content* comes to indicate an attitude towards life, a way of thinking, that gives back to art its role in the sphere of a precise social context.

In this order of ideas the particular task of literary criticism thus changes, no longer operating in the light of the distinction in the text between *poetry* (intuition) and *non poetry* (reflection), as happens in Crocean thought, but having as its goal intellectual and moral education, from which only a national-popular

literature can emerge, able to express the needs, reflections, emotions and feelings of a society and an epoch (*see Letteratura e vita nazionale*).

In Gramsci's view, to express the ways of a popular culture does not necessarily mean taking about peasants or workers, or adopting the formulae of *Socialist realism*. The struggle for a new culture is expressed through attention to social problems in their full complexity. In this sense, Gramsci postulates a notion of realism which is quite different from that indicted by other theorists of Marxism like Gyorgy Lukacs, who takes as his basis the Leninist theory of the *mirroring of reality*. The adequacy of artistic reproduction with respect to reality is not measured by the greater or lesser degree of mechanical representation of events nor in social factors that tend to highlight the processes of transformation of capitalist canon of transformation is introduced which suffocates tendencies to autonomous innovation in artistic practice.

Banfi, for his part, admits that *realism* can become a guiding factor for art, providing it contributes to making the work of art an active agent in the process of the transformation of reality. *Realist* art, for Banfi should prefigure that dimension of freedom and totality of human being to be found in the artistic *elasticity* of antiquity.

Among Banfi's pupils, Enzo Paci (1911-1976), who taught at the University of Milan, goes further into this theme of the encounter between phenomenology and Marxism, in the final phase of his reflection. According to Paci, we should resume the solicitations that Edmund Husserl offered in his last work, *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1935-37), particularly all those regarding the search for *meaning*.

The act of the suspension of judgement (*epoche*), by which the world is revealed in its "living presence" (*Lebendige Gegenwart*), shows the *subjective intentionality* which is directed at objects, giving them a meaning and revealing the *telos* immanent in them.

The phenomenological *epoche* highlights the world of origin, the world of life (*Lebenswelt*), as the place where the intersubjective meaning of the process of the foundation of the real is reconstituted. And even if Marxism cannot be identified with any concretely realized ideologico-political project, it offers no less, in Paci's view, adequate historical sense to intentionality as revealed by the processes of phenomenological description.

In his two last works, *Funzione delle scienze e significato dell' uomo* (1970) and *Idee per una enciclopedia fenomenologica* (1973), Paci re-interpreted Banfian rationalism, focussing on the contribution to it of existentialism and the influence

of the classic figures (Plato, Kant and Hegel). At the same time, in his studies of Mann, Rilke, Valery and Proust (9), the analysis of problems of art becomes also a way of exploring the theoretical and pragmatic significance of phenomenology in the name of an integral humanism. What seems to interest Paci still more is the phenomenological investigation of the formative processes of art¹⁰, like *symbol*, *expression* and *sense*, and critical interpretation should not approach it as a thing, or object, but should trace the *poiesis* in art, its being praxis, operation, and at the same time constitution of value.

This is the position from which the Venetian philosopher Stefano Zecchi (1945 -), trained at the school of Enzo Paci, sets out. An expert in German Romantic thought and in Husserl, Zecchi, who is one of the foremost figures in Italian aesthetics, has in recent years developed a brilliant and original lines of research into the concept of *beauty (bellezza)* (see his book of that name)¹¹. His Nineteen Theses in defence of beauty recently fired a lively debate in Italian aesthetic circles.

Beauty, according to Zecchi, is at the *origin* of every experience and every value. To recover the *beautiful* from the logical rationalism dominant in the modern world means for Zecchi to recover the *infinite possibility of sense* that belongs to truth. Against the destructuring of form, the fragmentation of languages and the dispersal of sense, Zecchi asserts art's task of a cognitive pedagogy that may lead man back to the search for the *truth* and to the recognition of the disanthropomorphization produced by the logic of mere *functional validity* typical of scientific- technological knowledge.

As editor of *Estetica* (a series of volumes early published by Il Mulino, Bologna), Zecchi is enriching the aesthetic debate in Italy on remarkable themes such as *Destiny* (1991), *Symbol* (1992) and *East and West* (1993). Belonging to an older generation than Zecchi, a pupil of Banfi's and of Adelchi Baratono's, is the Milanese philosopher and sculptor Dino Formaggio (1914-), editor of the journal *Fenomenologia e societa*. With regard to Banfi, Formaggio stresses the distinction between *esteticità* and *artisticità* (aestheticity and artisticity). Artisticity is the concrete objectivization of the aesthetic idea in a precise cultural context. Some of his major works - *Fenomenologia della tecnica artistica*, *L'idea di artisticità* (1962), *Arte* (1973) develop this thesis to the point of proposing aesthetics as a rigorous science in a manner not unlike Husserl's with respect to philosophy. This rigorous science will be a general aesthetics in so far as it is a science of the sensible world, and a special philosophy as a general theory of art. Taking up, then, the theses on the body itself that Husserl had developed in *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, Formaggio pays heed to the results of

the psychology of perception and anthropology. With these extra-philosophical contributions aesthetics may be defined as *prassi sensibile* (sensitive praxis), and the task of phenomenological investigation will thus be to recover the non-alienated value of work, together with the originary value of the body.

In his *Trattato di estetica*, the spheres of the poetical and the critical are held at a distance because they have "nothing to do with a general phenomenology of art"¹². In this respect, Formaggio's theory distinguishes itself from that of Luciano Anceschi (Milan 1911-) Who too, incidentally, is one of the most authoritative personalities in present-day Italian aesthetics. Professor at the University of Bologna from 1953 to 1981, honorary president of the Associazione Italiana per gli Studi di Estetica (AISE), of which he was one of the influential promoters in 1984, Anceschi, philosopher and literary critic, has also contributed notably to the renewal of Italian artistic culture, making his chair in Bologna a reference point for journals such as *Corrente*, *Letteratura*, *Il Verri* (the magazine founded in 1956), and *Studi di Estetica*: and for groups such as *Novissimi* and *Gruppo*, of which he was one of the animators and theorists.

From *Autonomia e eteronomia dell'arte* (1936), the work in which he traced the main lines of the "new critical phenomenology" method, and subsequently in the works that followed - *Istituzioni della poesia* (1968), *Il caos e il metodo* (1981) and *Gli specchi della poesia* (1989) - Anceschi has outlined a general theoretical model where aesthetics is not so much defined as a system, within which every experience is aprioristically defined, but as an open systematics, where the data of concrete aesthetic and artistic experience are integrated and correlated. It is therefore a systematics which signifies itself through the structures constituting it and not a system which signifies the structures. "Phenomenology ultimately reveals itself to be a critical form of relationism (not relativism)". Anceschi was to say, emphasizing too that his research proceeded under the aegis of a disillusioned humanism¹³, for the purpose of recovering the true meaning of human activity.

Luciano Anceschi's thought has been followed up and examined closely by several of his immediate pupils, above all Renato Barilli (1935-) and Lino Rossi (1930-). Professor of the Phenomenology of styles at the University of Bologna, Renato Barilli has developed Anceschi's *nuova fenomenologia critica* (new critical phenomenology) in the direction of a science of culture intent on identifying the connections between the various aspects (historical, aesthetic, artistic and in particular scientific) of the field analysed¹⁴. Lino Rossi, Professor of aesthetics at the same university, has, for his part, further developed the historiography of aesthetic ideas implicit in Anceschi's phenomenology, to which the latter had

devoted a specific essay¹⁵. For his part, Emilio Mattioli, Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Palermo, has given further consideration to the relations between the poetical and the rhetorical¹⁶, becoming a much esteemed specialist in ancient rhetoric and studies of the Sublime, whose flourishing condition in present day Italy is due not least to him.

The so-called Bologna school, formed on the initiative of Luciano Anceschi in the late nineteen thirties, was to count a large group of scholars (see note 17). Theirs has been, objectively speaking, one of the most important contributions to the vitality of Italian aesthetics.

One cannot conclude this brief report without mentioning Umberto Eco, semiotics scholar at the University of Bologna, and very well-known abroad also as the author of two successful novels: *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum*. Trained in Turin at the school of Luigi Pareyson, as a young man Eco devoted himself to the study of medieval aesthetics, and particularly St. Thomas Aquinas's thought, subsequently moving on to semiotics and communications science, of which he was to become one of the canniest and most competent theorists.

The list of his works is long, and characterizes an entire season of Italian culture over the last thirty years: *La definizione dell'arte* (1959), *Opera Aperta* (1962), *La struttura assente* (1968), *Le forme del contenuto* (1971), *Segno* (1973), *Trattato di semiotica generale* (1975), *Lector in febula* (1979), as well as the more recent works, have contributed incisively to setting cultural phenomena in the light of Pierce's inferential model and Lotman's semiotic model.

Notes and References

1. A. Banfi, 'La fenomenologia pura di E. Husserl e l'autonomia ideale della sfera teoretica' (1923) in *Filosofi contemporanei*, Florence 1961, p.3. On this theme see also S. Zecchi, *La fenomenologia dopo Husserl*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1978, 2 vols., I, pp.39-47.
2. L. Rossi, *Situazione dell'estetica in Italia*, Turin, Paravia, 1976, p. XVIII. Cf. also L. Rossi, *Fenomenologia critica e storiografia*, Milan, CLUEB, 1983.
3. On Crocean and Gentilian aesthetics see L. Rossi, 'Schema critico dell'estetica neoidealistica italiana', in *Studi di estetica*, Bologna, CLUEB, 1979, pp. 75-132.
4. Cf. A. Banfi, *I problemi di un'estetica filosofica*, Milan-Florence, parenti, 1961, pp.87ff. (now in *Opere*, vol. IV, ed. E. Mattioli and G. Scaramuzza, Reggio Emilia, Istituto A. Banfi, 1988.)
5. Cf. the essay 'Arte e socialita' (in A. Banfi, *Filosofia dell'arte*, Rome,

- Editori Riuniti, 1962, pp.140-158 and now in *opere*, V, cit.), originally written as a paper for the International Aesthetics Congress of 1956, the year of the Italian philosopher's death.
6. Cf. Eugenio Garin, Gramsci e Croce?, in AA. VV., *Studi gramsciani*, proceedings of the conference (Rome, 11-13 January 1958), Rome 1958, in particular pp. 6-11.
 7. For this, as for the other Gramscian texts, reference is to the edition of the *Quaderni dal carcere*, ed. V. Gerratana (Turin, Einaudi, 1974), written by Gramsci during his years of imprisonment in Fascist prisons and first published between 1948 and 1954.
 8. On this problem cf. S. Benassi, *Banfi e Lukacs: la nozione e il concetto di realismo*, in *Lukacs e l'estetica contemporanea*, Naples, Temi Moderni, 1980, pp.163-188.
 9. Cf. E. Paci, *Esistenza e immagine*, Milan, Tarantola, 1947; *Relazioni e significati*, Milan, Lampugnani Nigri, 1965-68, 3 vols.
 10. Cf. L. Rossi, *Situazione dell'estetica in Italia*, cit., m p. CX.
 11. Cf. S. Zecchi, *La bellezza*, Turin, Bolinghieri, 1991, pp.14-15. (Spanish translation in press).
 12. D. Formaggio e M. Dufrenne, *Trattato di estetica*, Milan, Modadori, 1981, 2 vols., I, p. 3.
 13. L. Anceschi, *Ultima lezione e programma*, in AA. *Le grandi correnti dell'estetica novecentesca* (Proceedings of the International Conference, Siena 17-20 May 1990), ed. G. Marchiano, Milan, Guerini e associati, 1991, p.156
 14. By R. Barilli see at least *Per un'estetica mondana*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1964; *Poetica e retorica*, Milan, Mursia, 1969; *La retorica*, ISEDI, 1979; *Culturologia e fenomenologia degli stili*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1982; *Corso di estetica*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1989.
 15. L. Anceschi's essay, 'Modelli di metodo per una storiografia estetica' in *Da Bacone a Kant*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1972. As regards L. Rossi's research, in addition to *Situazione dell'estetica in Italia*, cited above, see *Studi di estetica*, Bologna, CLUEB, 1983.
 16. Cf. E. Mattioli, *Luciano e l'Umanesimo*, Naples, Istituto italiano per gli studi storici, 1981; *Studi di poetica e retorica*, Modena, Mucchi, 1983; *Interpretazioni dello pseudo-Longino*, Modena, Mucchi, 1988.
 17. Among the main members of the Bologna School are: Paolo Bagni, on poetics and rhetoric; Luciano Nanni on the relations between semiology and phenomenology; Fernando Bollino, on 17th and 18th century French aesthetics;

Alessandro Serra and Stefano Ferrari, on the psychology of art; Luco Vetri, on contemporary literary poetics; Carlo Gentili, on phenomenology and the relations between poetics and hermeneutics; and Stefano Benassi, on Marxist aesthetics, on the figurative arts

and on the theory of the contemporary novel. The most recent research results have been discussed in a series of conferences, and subsequently collected and published under the title *Estetica e metodo: La Scuola di Bologna*, ed. L. Rossi, Bologna, Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1990.