

The Theory of Art in Italian Idealism

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Italian idealism has found its widest audience in the middle and popular strata of society: in the high schools, on the arts pages of newspapers and in other information media, with contributions of literary criticism, the interpretation of artistic events and work concerned with providing bearings for those wishing to understand aesthetic phenomena in general. It has been this sort of presence in Italian society that has made the philosophy of idealism (and particularly of the philosophers Croce and Gentile) a ground of cultural recognition, and often of national identity, for many intellectuals, teachers and professional people. A discussion of the theory of art in Italian idealism necessarily involves speaking of this aspect as well, that is, of the reasons for the diffusion of aesthetic conceptions that have built a vocabulary used and diffused in widely diverse social strata.

I find myself therefore with the task of chalking out the boundaries of my analysis, examining the problem in its mainly theoretical aspects, but also with the wish to let the reader glimpse, or perhaps just surmise, the reasons why the aesthetic vocabulary of Italian idealism has been so widely assimilated.

I shall first of all consider the significance of Croce's linguistics, and shall then take this theme within a fundamental problem of aesthetics at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one: the question of the death of art. In this context, with regard to the Italian situation, besides Croce, I shall refer to Francesco De Sanctis and Angelo Camillo De Meis. Finally I shall examine how the thematic nucleus of the idealistic "death of art" (with all this implies for the interpretation of artistic phenomena) recurs with the same theoretical value in Antonio Gramsci's conception of art and, more generally, in his discussion of the function of culture.

1. Modern linguistics is based on the Saussurian concept of *langue*, and this is the starting point for Saussure's analyses, which at times take widely divergent paths on individual questions, as they do on general research perspectives. However, it is always *langue*, not *parole*, which is the object of reflection. Croce's linguistics, on the contrary, takes theoretical fundamentality away from *Langue*, shifting it to *parole*. Thus emphasis is laid on the irrepeatability of the linguistic act and the sense of the uniqueness of the form of expression assumes a privileged position. For Croce the unique and irrepeatable character of the linguistic act derives from the universal category, art-intuition. It is

worth mentioning that if this idealist thesis regarding the problem of language emarginates Croce's position from the lines of development of modern linguistics, it has nevertheless been well-received, in its general and overall aspects, by several North American philosophers and literary critics, belonging to so-called "textualism". These are Hillis Miller, Paul De Man, Geoffrey Hartmann and Harold Bloom, who maintain that the determination of a problem is always relative to a particular aspect of language, namely the choice of the use of a certain word rather than another, of a word bearing one particular connotation rather than another. Taking this point of view as a starting point, analogous to idealism is the textualists' position with respect to science. The scientific model is, they claim, not a model of knowledge. The scientist puts together a vocabulary which is only one among many possible ones, and uses it to predict and control natural dynamics. It is a vocabulary that works very well for this purpose: scientific research is nothing other than putting together in the most coherent form a series of words and constructing a text. It is therefore literature - which avails itself of the uniqueness and irrepeatability of the word as essential and absolute form for any expression and communication which receives from the textualists (on the basis of the theses of idealist "linguistics") the central position in a cultural scheme that re-defines science and other forms of knowledge as literary *genres*.

Crocean linguistic contains the premises of American textualism and the elements of "transgression" that lead from the traditional prominence of *langue* to the ontological priority of *parole*. Language is in Croce's view not a means of perception or the form of a judgement, but expresses the act of the intuitive consciousness of reality. Language can fulfil this function if one has a generalizing and categorial view of language, indifferent to the diversity of expressive forms. In this sense both the differences between individual arts and the differences between genres are ignored. For Croce genres like the "tragic", the "comic" and the "sublime" are pseudo-concepts with which aesthetics need not concern itself.

The intuitional and irrepeatable aspect of the linguistic act inevitably involves the abolition of genres: on this theoretical basis the textualists, and Harold Bloom in particular, reassess romantic thought, giving second place however to what seems to me the most important problem, the theory of the symbolic and the argument that distinguishes symbol from allegory.

To get a better cultural picture of the intuitional aspect of the Crocean linguistic act in its unique and non-repeatable form, we need to recall the thesis of "pure visibility", put forward by Fiedler in *Die Ursprung der künstlerische Tätigkeit*, a text that had considerable influence on Crocean aesthetics. Fiedler's

thesis affirms that there exists a world of absolutely original forms which are not static or definite, but in movement in a continuous process of transformation. Knowledge of these forms cannot be acquired by the language that we commonly use to talk about things that are happening and to communicate habitual perceptions to each other: to understand them we need to possess a special language which is neither known nor available to all: the language of art.

In this perspective one thus reaches the stage in aesthetics of identifying art and, therefore, of considering under the general category of expressiveness language as much as art. Thus Croce was able to affirm that the subject of aesthetics is not language in general, but "language in its essence, language in so far as it is expression" (1) The possibility of reaching the essential form of language - which was for Croce expression - involves a process of excluding anything that might be further definition or specification of the language itself. It is thus a question of establishing that distinct classes of expression do not exist and that the essential reality of expression is the essential reality of language.

The Crocean identification of art and language cannot then take place on the empirical plane, because the same form of consciousness acts in language as in art, because language and art are the same transcendental form of consciousness.

Everything that does not lie within the essential form of language is classed by Croce as practical activity. For example, the sign is external to the essentiality of language. The sign is the product of praxis: "signs," says Croce, "are expedients and practical means of calling up things or facts and, as it were, of drawing them". Thus, to return to Saussure's distinction, we may say that for Croce only *parole* has significance and is language in the real sense, since it is through *parole* that the living and irreducible unity of the sentence is expressed.

In a letter to Vossler (29-9-1904), in which he comments on the latter's book *Sprache als Schopfung und Entwicklung*, Croce stressed two directions that can be followed in order to understand the structure and function of language: the first regards the aesthetic study of the word, that is "the word incarnate, concrete and real language, and thus the aesthetic rules, but also literary genres. It should by now be clear that for Croce the first approach is the fundamental one on which aesthetic theory is constructed; this is founded on the identity of intuition and expression, and thus, according to what was said earlier concerning the expression-language relationship, on the relation of equivalence between intuition, expression and art. This relationship relegates to a subordinate position the exterior character of expression, that is, the externalization of form and, in effect, the way in which a work of art is structured technically, while giving central status in the aesthetic-philosophical enquiry to the problem of artistic

production as interior event. Let us now consider this aspect and distinguish its implications for the general evaluation of the process of artistic production and the theoretical prominence it assumes.

2. Croce charts the process of aesthetic production in four moments : " a) impressions; b) expression or aesthetic spiritual synthesis; c) hedonistic accompaniment or pleasure in the beautiful (aesthetic pleasure); d) translation of the aesthetic event into physical phenomena (Sounds, tones, movements, combinations of lines and colors etc.)" (4) of this process, the second point is in Croce's view the only one that really regards aesthetics, in that it is a philosophical problem.

If we now consider the entire aesthetic process described in the four points mentioned above, and keep in mind the absolute primacy that Croce ascribes to point b, we can see that at the basis of Crocean aesthetics a constant is always, as a distinct feature, the primacy of the aesthetic over the artistic moment, that is of the aesthetic moment -as intuitive state and ground of interiority -over the artistic moment, namely art in its structure and historical reality. All Croce's aesthetics, considered also in their subsequent modified forms, will always maintain this theoretical basis, so that when he wishes to explain the artistic phenomenon according to these aesthetic premises, what he always finds himself doing is explaining the subjective, interior and intuitive moment of the aesthetic spirit.

An example of this is the way in which Croce distinguishes the beautiful from the ugly. The "beautiful" is successful expression: it thus follows that the "ugly" is *unsuccessful* expression. Both the beautiful and the ugly belong to expression; we should note therefore that the ugly exists in the same orbit as the beautiful: namely, expression. The most significant consequence of this thesis is that, if one claims the identity of intuition and expression, if art is the form of this identity, if the ugly is unsuccessful expression (and thus *not* art), one must therefore maintain that at times intuition is not always expression and that it can indeed lead to the negation of expression. By definition, expression should always be intuition organised esthetically; the presence of the ugly makes it clear that at times there fails to occur an identity of intuition and expression. This coincidence might be admitted only under the profile of an ideal absolute perfection of the artistic form, but it fails to occur as soon as aesthetic reflection, rather than basing itself on a normative premise, proceeds from the historical, finished reality of the work of art.

We might observe that the beautiful, considered as the category that determines the sphere of art, is in fact a form of intuition which establishes a normative and absolute aesthetic judgment, but which says nothing about the concreteness of the work of art or the variety of styles.

This is a characteristic of all neo-idealist trends which give pride of place to a normative aesthetic system over the reading of the artistic phenomenon, conditioning and, to some degree, predetermining aesthetic reflection on the reality of a work of art. Try and substitute the Crocean "beautiful", the quality determining the artistic, with other interpretative concepts, such as Lukacs' "bourgeois decadence" or Gramsci's pedagogic function of art for the constitution of the national political identity, and you will see that, in the name of an ideal and normative vision of aesthetics, one always loses the concreteness of the artistic phenomenon as such, and this results in serious, often banal misunderstandings of the effective main lines of European art and literature. On the theoretical plane the result of all this is the denial of the truth giving significance of the consciousness that one experiences through art, and thus an inevitable nihilism which does not admit the autonomy of the *poiein*.

Croce underrated the art growing around him: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Valery, Eliot are non-poetry. In 1918 he published an important aesthetic essay, *Carattere di totalità dell'espressione artistica*, in which he defined the function of intuition, no longer intended as individual knowledge, but as a sentiment which has the character of totality; this different type of intuition Croce called lyrical intuition. Indeed in this work it is interesting to note the (apparently marginal) passage in which he defends himself from those who had wished to use his intuitionism for the purpose of understanding and explaining the "intuitionist fragmentarism" of the impressionists and of several expressionists. In this defence it seems clear that Croce wishes to disassociate his aesthetic from any possible type of interpretation of artistic phenomena, while showing at the same time that it has been thought out and constructed independently of the historical reality of art.

3. Together with the questions posed by Crocean aesthetics, they can be examined in terms of a central problem of neo-idealism, which yet involves a more general discourse on art in contemporary culture. This is the theme that commonly goes under the name of the "death of art" and which comprehends several concepts in Hegel's aesthetics. Present in it is the problem of the "Classical" and of the end of the "classical" in modernity; we get a glimpse of romantic aesthetics; we are given Hegel's judgement of it and the need for a renewed confrontation of our culture with romantic culture.

Croce translates the Hegelian expression *Auflosung* (dissolution, resolution) with "morte" and subsequently, "fine" in Italian. His translation gives a poor rendering of the German term, above all because the Italian words used by Croce give an advance setting and orientation to the problem in a direction which does not correctly reflect Hegel's. Hegel, Croce tells us, affirms "the mortality, indeed

the death which has already occurred in art"⁵. This reading of Hegel is based primarily on a radicalisation of the meaning of *Auflosung*, which deprives the term of its dialectical connotation, giving greater weight to its strictly empirical value: Gentile had already pointed out that Croce's interpretation of Hegel's aesthetic was based on an inadequate distinction between the empirical and the ideal event, which led him to identify the dialectical transcendence of art with the real end of artistic phenomena.

Croce's position seems in any case very explicit and leaves not a shadow of doubt about the sense that he attributes to the "morte" or "fine" of art. In his essay on Hegel he states too that for the German philosopher, "when philosophy has completed its work, art must disappear, because it is superfluous: art must die; indeed it is already well and truly dead"⁶. Not so much, therefore, the dialectical death of art, in the sense of an "eternal dying" which implies an "eternal rebirth", as other Hegelians, such as Bosanquet, tried to claim, but, says Croce, death "which has well and truly occurred; the death of art in the historical world"⁷. Art, for Hegel, is only a "philosophical error".

It can be said that though Hegel does not speak of the death but of the *Auflosung* of art, the idea of the transcending of the value of the truth of art (through religion and philosophy) is nevertheless essential in his system. A determining factor in his aesthetics is a discourse on the end of the "classical", as place where the truth of art is manifested, and thus the impossibility of a post-classical art which can conserve a sense of truth: thus Hegel interprets and takes a negative view of the breaking onto the scene of the subjectivism of the very aesthetics of Romanticism.

Nor does the position of Bosanquet, who in his well-known dispute with Croce maintained that one should not speak of the empirical and actual death of art, but rather of dialectical death, death as dying into truth, death as a prelude to the renewal and new self-expression of art⁸, shift, for all that, the terms of the question. Neither the thesis of the empirical death of art, nor that of its dialectical death touches the centre of the Hegelian conception on the end of the formal perfection and of the absolute equilibrium of classical art, which results in the loss of the truth value of post-classical artistic form. This thesis, albeit indirectly, supports the nihilism typical of the present day which declares the death of *poiein*, which does not consider the possibility of the formal autonomy of a post-classical world, and which considers the *past* to be the fundamental temporal modality, the only one that provides awareness of the true, the beautiful, what is creatively possible and the very possibility of creating poetry. And on these bases it can be seen how all contemporary aesthetics (even that conventional

assimilation of concepts that do not have a correct theoretical foundation and that we use more or less unconsciously and banally when, for instance, we visit an art gallery) is Hegelian.

However, with the theme of the death of art Croce not only interpreted Hegelian thought, but intended to enter a lively debate about this problem, in which masters and friends of his, like De Sanctis and De Meis, had participated in the mid-nineteenth century.

A colleague of Carducci's at the University of Bologna, the Hegelian Angelo Camillo De Meis had raised the question of the death of art in his discussions with Spaventa, Imbriani and De Sanctis. For De Meis the death of art means the end of a specific form of artisticity, namely *poetry*. Poetry still belongs to the infancy of mankind and is destined to disappear with the growing up and coming of age of cultural life. Poetry dies so that scientific truth may be affirmed and thought no longer needs to express itself in mythical and metaphorical form. Strength, maturity, reflection, says De Meis, bring about the death of poetry; and the very modification of poetic form explains the evolution of thought towards the objective knowledge of reality. Indeed poetry, says De Meis, is, in its earliest expressions, religion, becoming in turn epic, then dramatic and finally lyric; in this progression we can see gradual detachment of poetry from imagination and its growing resemblance to those forms of rationalization which lead to its dissolution. Manzoni is witness to the death of poetry: his poetics testifies to the transition of the lyrical to historical, philosophical and scientific prose. Poetry no longer possesses "the infinity of art, the ideal, the divine"⁹, these being replaced by reflection and the analytical spirit.

A determining presence of Vico's thought can be detected in the definition De Meis gives to the problem of the death of art: a presence found also in De Sanctis, in a cloudier form in Croce and not at all in Hegel, while in De Meis themes pertaining to Vico are re-interpreted from a positivist perspective. Imagination disappears when the world comes of age and, like religion, poetry too, which grows out of imagination, becomes an ingenuous and illusory form of the interpretation of life. Vico is thus re-read according to the spirit of positivism: "Real poetry, true art", De Meis asserts, "is by now science as the triumph of reason".¹⁰

In a letter to De Meis, De Sanctis wrote (20.3.1969) : Your ideas didn't surprise me: they are mine as well: we were breast-fed on them. But in you they are real ideas, with a clear and philosophical consciousness: in me they are semi-ideas, to use your language, and thus tentative and cloudy"¹¹

The question of the death of art is, in fact, applied by De Sanctis with great critical wisdom to literary genres. The philosophical dimension that this problem can assume takes second place for him, becoming a question specifically linked to literary criticism and to the function of literature. Just as De Meis had spoken not of the death of art of poetry, significantly limiting the boundaries of the artistic, so De Sanctis does not declare the death of poetry but of one poetic genre: epics. And he adds: "Those who are against Goethe, Schiller, Byron and Leopardi, because they make, as they say, metaphysics in verse, strike me as being like those priests who get angry with philosophy and reason, repeating in chorus: 'Faith, Faith -Alas ! Faith is no more; poetry is dead, or to put it better, faith and poetry are immortal: what is gone is a particular way they had of being. Faith today springs from conviction, poetry is sparked by meditation: they are not dead, they are transformed'"¹²

For De Sanctis the death of art or of poetry is an abstract formula which, if adhered to in its assertive dogmatism, precludes the possibility of understanding the specificity of the artistic phenomenon: certainly science and analytic thought have insinuated themselves into poetry, but this does not mean the end of poetry, rather the transformation of the genre, which remains alive alongside science and scientific knowledge. Thus De Sanctis observes that "formerly the poet was fired by enthusiasm, by sacred imaginings, and contemplated beauty; today he makes poetry about beauty, love, enthusiasm, genius, fancy, etc. It is the poet who turns his attention on himself and analyses himself and explains himself, having made himself into a critic and philosopher"¹³. Thus the end of one poetic genre and the transformation of the poetical: from epic to lyric poetry. The example of this is Leopardi.

In 1855 De Sanctis met Manzoni, who declared the non-poeticalness of Leopardi's poetry, exempting *All Italia* from this charge. In reply De Sanctis wrote an admirable essay on the *canzone* entitled *Alla sua donna*. Leopardi senses the end of the evocative greatness of poetry, and yet his verses continue to be an heroic witness to the necessity of poetry: "To this great Italian all that remains of poetry is bitter remembrance", and he laments its death in his life, in the world [.....]. But the poetry that is dead in his mind still lives in his heart [.....]. Leopardi is no less a poet; the believer in him gets the better of the sceptic; poetry, crushed by and put to flight by science, finds shelter in his heart. Nor does the image die: it melts into the true and and is reborn beneath death, is reborn to die once more, a perpetual process of creation and destruction"¹⁴

Unlike De Meis, De Sanctis rejected the positivist influx and conditioning, and set the inexhaustible richness of life, of which art is the highest manifestation,

against forms of reflectiveness, which may very well explain and criticize the different expressions of existence, but which yet will never be able to regenerate life. In the inaugural lecture, *Science and Life*, for the academic year 1872-3 at the University of Naples, De Sanctis declared: "Science is growing at the expense of life. The more you give to thought, the more you take from action. You know life when it rushes past you [...]. Faith departs and philosophy is born. The twilight of art is the dawn of criticism. History ends and historians appear. Morality grows corrupts and moralists appear. The State goes to ruin, and there begins the science of the state"¹⁵.

In an essay on Victor Hugo, De Sanctis reaffirmed the immortal spirit of poetry, as if it were the very essence of man's expressive faculty: immortal, like man; finite, like man. "Poetry is eternal, as faith, science, liberty, God are eternal. So first kill the heart and the imagination. Chase poetry from the Church, and she shines in the nation, and if she flees the nation, she repairs to the family, finds refuge in the fields. And if in the mouth of the French poet she evaporates, she is reborn in the mouth of the Polish or Magyar poet"¹⁶.

Once again in reply to De Meis, De Sanctis acknowledged the dominant presence of science in contemporary culture, which had brought religion and art to the river-bed of analytic thought. But he did not accept the positivist radicalization of this situation, neither its definitive nor its ineluctable character: on the contrary, he maintained that when all was said, the proclaimed victory of scientific thought was no great boon to the history of mankind: "But I should add", so the letter to De Meis concludes, "that this form of thought is no impotent imbecile; if it has a history, the time will come when it, in its turn, will be Art and Religion".

4. In *Letteratura e vita nazionale* Gramsci explained his relationship with De Sanctis and why it was to him that one must look for the right way to establish the relation between art, art criticism and civil society: "The type of literary criticism specifically of the philosophy of practical action is offered by De Sanctis [.....]: it must fuse the struggle for the new culture, that is for a new humanism, the criticism of customs, of the sentiments and conceptions of the world, with aesthetic and purely artistic criticism in impassioned fervour, even if it be only in the form of sarcasm"¹⁷.

Croce's introductory words to *La letteratura italiana nel sec. XIX* give Gramsci the opportunity to justify the link with De Sanctis's thought: "The direction," writes Croce, "which is now called historical materialism and which consists of conceiving historical events in their genesis and development from the simplest material elements, often finds in De Sanctis a non-doctrinaire representative"¹⁸.

Gramsci's analysis of the artistic phenomenon, steered by Croce in the direction of De Sanctis, touches essentially on two points: a) the role of culture in national life; b) the role of intellectuals in national renewal. Gramsci does not discuss the theme of the death of art directly, but inherits the idealist implications of the problem. From Croce's perspective he finds himself denying the autonomy of the artistic phenomenon in itself, and from De Sanctis's perspective (where above all he gives primacy to the sociological aspect of literary criticism) he tends to see the dominant and constituent presence of social transformations in the construction of literary genres and in their variations and disappearances. The idealist conception of the death of art becomes for Gramsci the need to effect a total subordination of the artistic event to the pedagogic-political function that it is to fulfil.

Neither casual nor insignificant is Gramsci's sympathy for writers who question themselves in their work as to how to deal with the relation between literature and national life. Hence his interest in Alfredo Oriani, his interest in popular and easily digestible literary forms such as the serial story. For example, Gramsci insists on the need to defend Raffaele Giovanoli's *Spartaco*. Once the grammatical errors have been eliminated and the work translated into correct Italian, precisely because in his view the creation of literature should take as its starting point the objective situation of popular culture, however poor or backward this maybe.

The idealist thesis of the death of art which has assumed in turn the senses of the end of art, the end of poetry and the falling into disuse of one type of poetic genre, now becomes the theorization of the fundamentality of a genre on the basis of the pedagogic function that it is able to fulfil. This means that to be deemed legitimate, any artistic activity and any artistic product must go through a "national" and "autochthonic" phase.

This is how Croce's aesthetics on the one hand, and on the other, Gramsci's position, which influenced so great a part of militant progressive criticism, were responsible for yet a further postponement of a considered and constructive encounter between our culture and the great culture of twentieth century Europe.

This idealist conception of art was followed up and radicalized in Togliatti and Alicata's post Resistance Italian Communist Party, which declared bourgeois and therefore to be actively opposed- every thing that affirmed the autonomy of the artistic project and the artistic form. This was a cultural Stalinism which theorized *realism* as the heir to the national popular vision of Gramsci's aesthetic.

Notes and References

1. B. Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell' espressione e linguistica generale*, Bari 1965 [11], p. 162.
2. B. Croce, *Lecture di poeti*, Bari 1950, pp. 248-9.
3. Cf. T. De Mauro, 'Origine e sviluppo della linguistica crociana', *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 1954; and *Introduzione alla semantica*, Rome-Bari 1975, chapters IV and VII; see also P. D' Angelo's *L' estetica di Benedetto Croce*, Rome-Bari 1982.
4. Croce, *Estetica*, op. cit., p. 105.
5. *Ibid.* P. 336. D. Formaggio's pages are essential reading on the problem of the death of art, and have been my guide in the above considerations: cf. *L'idea di artisticità*, Milan 1962, new revised edition: *La "morte dell' arte" e L' Estetica*, Bologna 1983.
6. B. Croce, *Saggio sullo Hegel*, Bari 1927 (3), p. 89.
7. *Ibid.* p. 90.
8. Cf. B. Bosanquet, *Croce's Aesthetic*, "Proceeding of the British Academy", Vol. IX, 1914.
9. A.C. De Meis, *Dopo la laurea*, Bologna 1868, p. 331.
10. *Ibid.* part II, Bologna 1869, p.17.
11. *Carteggio ineito di Francesco De Sanctis*, ed. B. Croce, Naples 1915, p. 29.
12. F. De Sanctis, 'Alla sua donna' , in *Saggi*, Bari 1965, vol. I, p. 267.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.* pp. 271-72.
15. F. De Sanctis, 'La scienza e la vita' , in *Saggi*, op. cit., vol. III pp. 163-4.
16. F. De Sanctis, *Le "Contemplazioni"* , in *Saggi*, op. cit., vol. II, p.59.
17. A. Gramsci, *Letterature e vita nazionale*, Turin 1950, p. 7.
18. F. de Sanctis, *La letteratura italiana nel sec. XIX*, ed. B. Croce, Naples, P. xxv.
19. Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, cit. p. 134.