

# The De Sanctis: Croce line and the Problem of Modernity

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1. There are moments in twentieth century Italian intellectual culture which need reappraising independently of certain "formulae" of one school or another, and of those tensions which have had a negative effect on the actual understanding of the facts of our culture.

The debates which - above all in the immediate post-war years- led to a sort of conflict that set a De Sanctis-Croce line against an aesthetics aligned on an unlikely De-Sanctis-Gramsci axis, today seem utterly remote to us; whereas there still seems to be a certain vitality in the numerous hypotheses proposed for poetics in the very same years (often in the idealist sphere). The "discovery" of semiotics and linguistics still seems topical, as does the great phenomenological studies with spiritualistic and metaphysical characteristics....

Some directions, certainly - and Marxism notable- today seem to be in decline. One even wonders whether they should not be considered moments to be consigned to the archaeology of knowledge, or whether they cannot be more usefully re-examined in a different frame of reference. This applies not only to methodological and historiographical questions, but to many theoretical points as well. And it is, indeed, with these questions in mind that I wish here to trace a path taken by Italian aesthetics along the De Sanctis-Croce line. It is a path that needs reappraising outside the models developed and proposed by a certain kind of historicist literary criticism, and most of all perhaps by Crocianism, a school which has all too often proved incapable of understanding the many-sided and contradictory situation of the art and culture of our century.

2. In his *Saggio critico sul Petrarca* De Sanctis, plotting a complex methodology for literary research, traced the profile of an aesthetics of form, which he placed within a modern philosophy of *poiein*, or poetic making. Not form as locus of the beautiful in itself and of hollow idols, nor form as shadow of the true, shadow of the concept, which belongs to Platonic petrarchism, but an idea of form in which *spirit*, *thought* and *concept* converge; so that in it we find "passion, imaginative heat, impression, pleasure, melancholy". Form is not, therefore, an abstract paradigm of poetic making, but is the constantly *living life* which constantly *recreates itself*- it is totality. Thus only he who "conquers and tames and kills the ideal within himself, or in other words, realizes it, produces a form, of which all is fulfilled and

forgotten" can claim to be considered an artist. "Make me living things, and call them what you will", writes De Sanctis in the note added to the second edition (1983) of the *Saggio* on Petrarch. And this remark contains the whole sense of an aesthetics which, in many respects, seems to move in a direction analogous to that of an author like Moritz who founds his philosophy of art on the notion of the "self-achieved". Thus the word "form" cannot be applied to anything that refers to the indefinite, the confused, the sketchy, the bare, the sliced, the exaggerated, the over-abundant, the allegorical, the abstract, the general, the particular, but only to that which is *identical to itself*. If there is a geology of art, this dissolves in form and *re-signifies itself* on another plane. And the aesthetic occurs, *appears*, with the appearance of form, into which the *anterior world* of art immerses, fuses and forgets itself. Therefore, De Sanctis notes, "form is itself, as the individual is himself, and no theory is more destructive of art than that which constantly fills our ears with the beautiful, the manifestation, vestment, light, or veil of the true or of the idea. The aesthetic world is not appearance, but substance; it is in fact substance, the living itself; its criteria, its reasons for living are summed up in this single motto: I am alive." (F. De Sanctis, *Saggio Critico sul Petrarca*, edited by E. Bonora, Bari 1955, p. 29). The *living itself* is not just the *Grund* of art, but the *telos* towards which form tends; it is the movement through which the artist "forgets himself in things, and the more he forgets himself, the more those things leap forth alive and true, appearing in a light of their own: *in this obliteration of the world*, the "highest ideality of expression" is achieved, which for De Sanctis consists of *idealizing things*. These are some of the reflections that led De Sanctis to study authors and moments in our literary history and in European civilization: Dante and the *Divine Comedy*, Machiavelli, Guiccardini, Foscolo, Parini, Ariosto, Tasso, Mazzini and Leopardi ... He returns to Leopardi on several occasions not only to rescue him from certain interpretations tending to favour the civil and patriotic *canzoni* (and to stress the poetic power of the *Idilli*) but to make observations on the plane of the theory of art. Witness his analyses of prose and of that artistic form of prose which is dialogue, through which Leopardi criticized a certain oratory tendency and introduced - with a new kind of prose - seriousness of thought and, with it, the inventive faculty. In prose Leopardi sought, apart from its logical qualities, the effects of art. "The imagination", writes De Sanctis, "is excluded from this prose, as force of the spirit, generator of illusions, and opponent of the true. But it is present there in the form of myth or fable, as a veil beneath which thought appears, or as an imaginative base from which reason springs forth". (F. De Sanctis, *Giacomo Leopardi*, ed. E. Ghidetti, Rome 1983, p. 217).

De Sanctis's reflection on Leopardi's conception of prose, the interpretation of the *dialoghi* or the reading of the *idilli*, no less than the studies on Dante and Manzoni, and certain eye-opening pages in the *Storia della letteratura italiana*, show the meaning and aesthetic importance of a criticism which is sensitive to the problem of the respective relationships between poetry and philosophy, poetry and abstract thought, and form and content. They are perspicuous observations, part of that *aesthetic project* on which De Sanctis had been working from 1856 to 1860, while teaching at Zurich Polytechnic. It is a project which, despite marked differences and a different cultural horizon, appears *within* and contiguous with Hegel's reflections on art. De Sanctis refers in fact to Hegel and repeats the idea by which "he who grasps the situation is already an artist", and that develops the principle according to which "the beautiful is nothing other than the harmony of form and idea": And form and idea *are born together*.

The reference to Hegel is essentially of criteriological value. It makes it possible to evaluate aesthetic ideas on the scale of precise critical interpretations, and to devise categories that test the living reality of art. Thus, the boundaries of the poetic field can be marked out as locus of multiple tensions and of infinite movements - field as *parti pris*, we would say nowadays, as *argument* which -as De Sanctis observed in an essay entitled, in point of fact, *Dell' argomento nella Divina Commedia*, first published in 1857 in the *Rivista Contemporanea* -is not a *tabula rasa* on which anything may be imprinted: the argument is "a conditioned and pre-determined subject already containing within itself virtually its entire poetics- its organic laws, its concept, its parts, its form and its style". Style, form- in other words the organic unity of art. "In my view the essence of art is form, not form as vestment, veil, mirror or what have you, manifestation of a generality distinct from it, however united to it it may be; but form, into which the idea has already passed, and in which the individual has already risen: this is the real organic unity of art". Unity is the crucial element by which De Sanctis comes close to Hegel, even while resolutely moving away from him.

With De Sanctis a genuine reform of idealistic aesthetics got under way, in which he was to recover the modes and procedures of a certain realistic and bourgeois narrative of the nineteenth century; and above all be heedful of the great scientific revolution of the century, the decisive turning points in the very perspectives of modern culture.

3. When *Il darwinismo nell' arte* (1883) appeared, it seemed to many that De Sanctis had made a positivist choice and introduced evolutionist intentions into his critical perspective, largely disowning his idealist and Hegelian Background. But this essay, which should be read in relation to *Il principio del realismo*, is a decisive opening towards modern forms of poetic making,

in a sort of *return to things*, namely, a sort of *Journey through poetry as a living and bold reality*.

The essay traces the lines of a critical method more closely adherent to reality and more fruitful for studying and understanding artistic works; and states the need to set aside a musical and idyllic imaginative literature in order to reconstruct the world of lyrical phantoms having as its basis a consciousness that has been *remade* and *reconnected* with life. Darwinism, in this light, is thus nothing other than the rule and discipline of the imagination; it is the very criterion of realism which has nothing whatsoever in common with positivist objectivism, but which presents itself as a movement capable of developing all the richness to be found in existence. In this regard, De Sanctis speaks of a new realism which "can be considered as yet a further formation of Hegel's doctrine", in that certain great Hegelian thoughts "like the identity of being and knowing, the objective nature of concepts, the meaning of morality in world history and many others are not only admitted, but re-worked, and once the obscure, the contradictory and the false mixed with the true have been removed, brought forth in all their truth in a clear form.....".

Realism takes the form of *Lebenswelt*, which penetrates the works of constantly new materials and transforms the entire range of our perceptions, develops our sense of the real, establishes the closest of ties between our *poietic* capacities and potentialities and the world of art. The modern sciences- and Darwinism is to be considered a science in that it presents itself as an authentic vision of the world- have brought about a revolution in the modern age, affecting our behaviour and the way in which we view, understand and interpret things.

Thus we must make the effort to catch things in their state of becoming; analogously, in art we must know how to seize the sense of the living, the autonomy of the *poetic person*, the *plasticism of form*, the *calm of feeling*, popularity of expression, naturalness.. The fact, however, that one is becoming aware of the end of the great narrations, does not mean the collapse, or surrender, of philosophy; on the contrary, it demands a "problematic adjustment" to the variety of things, a redefinition of the strategies of knowledge. Unlike what since occurred, De Sanctis notes, when our spirit was willing to seek ideas, *I' esprit des choses* and to inhabit the abstract regions of the concept, making use of particular kinds of knowledge rooted in grammars, rhetorics, logics and metaphysics, in the modern age we need to develop a new approach to knowledge, by which we may study things in themselves, in their nature and their life- a knowledge, that makes use of chemistry, natural history anatomy, physiology, pathology, which are not to be considered "special studies", but membership cards of that *general culture* which is transforming life, literature and art. In other words, De

Sanctis sensed with extraordinary lucidity the twilight of the old humanist vision, the exhaustion of the reasons which had supported Western civilization for centuries. In the face of such a situation one can take the line of the *laudatores temporis acti*, typical of a certain academic and university culture, suspicious of everything that is emerging in society and in the world; De Sanctis steers clear of these facile solutions, trying rather to understand the reasons that have led to the great nineteenth century scientific revolution and to find there a possible space for the forms of art, sensibility and imagination.

4. Even if many of his remarks (and not just those concerning the political and ideological battles he fought), would seem to warrant positivist readings, De Sanctis, when insisting on the need of an art which is *closer to things*, had no intention whatever of adhering to those naturalistic poetics developing in the culture at the end of the century. On the contrary, through a general reform of idealist aesthetics, he wished to reconstruct a philosophy of art inscribed in an *ontology of the infinite*.

Let us consider a few theoretical questions dealt with in the *Studio sopra Emilio Zola*. In each novel- De Sanctis remarks- there is a fable conceived and woven," so as to express the movement of natural forces in its necessary course, the resulting effect of which is character and personality". De Sanctis immediately defines his terms. In order to conceive and weave a fable of the kind invented by Zola, science and observation, he adds, are not enough: what are needed are ideal faculties, the first of which is the constructive and architectonic, which leaves nothing to chance, to miracle or marvel, but preordains and coordinates everything. Zola, he observes, experiments but does not register facts and findings passively: he constructs in such a way as to be considered not so much a scientist as a metaphysician, who does not entrust himself to the Absolute and its laws, but invents fictional realities, possible universes. In this way Zola " is himself the one who forms the world according to his idea", constructing his poetic fable, whose basis is certainly reality, but reality that dissolves and dies within the variety of forms and new colours belonging to art and poetry.

At the end of paragraph IX of the *Studio*, De Sanctis gives an exemplary clarification of his conception of art. "Artists", he writes, "are like great magicians who make objects as light as shadows, take them, over and make them creatures of their imagination or shaping hand. The real is simply the raw material, transformed by that industry called art; ..... Art in its transformations must keep the base intact, reproducing in its inventions and transformations natural reality, even imitating the natural process. What makes him an artist is his living feeling for the human ideal and his powerful constructional and representational imagination."

(F. De Sanctis, *Studio sopra Emilio Zola*, in *Saggi critici*, vol. III, edited by L. Russo, Rome-Bari 1979 [4], p. 304).

This is an illuminating step where the field of art is identified, art as self-sufficient form, albeit revealing in *being* what it is the infinite variety of its ways and its structure. Content and form are one. Even if in the form of art there is a slight surviving trace of the memory of the world this has lost its real beauty.

De Sanctis undoubtedly owes this aesthetic perspective to the time he spent in the company of Romantic philosophy and Hegel's thought in particular, but it achieves tangible form above all through the critical analysis, interpretations and readings of poets and prose writers.

Rene' Wellek rightly compares De Sanctis's work to that of Belinsky or Taine, for the Italian critic's rare capacity to be at once a historian, critic and judge of poetry - contributing to a decisive renewal of Italian aesthetic culture not only as regards the "classicist" tradition, but also in relation to certain proposals, with strong ideological connotations (Cantu, Settembrini), which in the second half of the nineteenth century seemed to find a wide hearing in Italy.

5. What then is De Sanctis's place in the history of art criticism? This is a question that Croce asks himself in *Storia dell' estetica per saggi* (Rome-Bari 1967, p. 237), where after identifying connections, relations and differences between De Sanctis's criticism and that of Foscolo and Giovita Scalvini, he remarks that De Sanctis, though having spent a long time in the company of Hegelian philosophy, whose abstract aesthetic conceptualism he rejected, was unable to determine what "form" is in art. And intuition? And figure? And the event that takes place as self-sufficient monad? Or is it a fundamentally vague, ambiguous, shifting, *peripheral* space?

Undoubtedly De Sanctis lacks the philosopher's "deductive rigour", and there are many oscillations and contradictions in his theoretical work. But, perhaps, the very indeterminacy of the idea of form allows him to grasp the complexity of the modes of the *poiein*, its polyphonic variations; to identify the absolute in things, in that world of life which in the final analysis constitutes the condition by which an infinity number of fictional universes and possible worlds can be realised. Croce thought he had reformed De Sanctis's project, by calling form *intuition* and thus distinguishing it from all the other forms of the spirit. But here we should ask ourselves whether Croce's *intuition* genuinely defines the autonomy of art, or whether it does not end up, rather, as a sort of abstractism, which makes the world of forms extremely uncertain.

At the conclusion of his *Filosofia dell' arte*, Gentile stressed the theoretical shakiness of Croce's criticisms of De Sanctis, on the very question of form. Post-Desanctisian aesthetics, wrote Gentile, "has been the work of literary decadentism and dilettantism, removing the problem of art from that serious, religious, profoundly philosophical world in which De Sanctis had placed it; and offering as a solution a doctrine that could be regarded as conforming to his predecessor's by someone with no more than a surface approach to ideas. De Sanctis's art is indeed form, but form of life; life in all its complex constitution, with its moral value, its ideals, with science, with philosophy, and with its religious content. A form which presupposes and implies, in that it resolves in itself each of its presuppositions, a world, which is *the* world: the idea, in the profound sense in which Hegel speaks of it. A world, which, a critic cannot ignore; and which he must feel inside himself, and seek through art, or in his criticism. With criticism, and with De Sanctisian aesthetics we each of us feel that we are entering and enclosing ourselves inside the poem, but there we find the whole of life with all its laws" (Gentile, *La filosofia dell' arte*, Florence 1973 [3], p. 320).

*Entering the poem* means entering the organic unity of an autonomous world; getting closer to the works, evaluating the difference between artist and poet, questioning oneself, for example, on the role in Dante's *Comedy* of allegory, asceticism, the religious and political struggle and tradition.... Entering the poem means, therefore, understanding how in Dante's consciousness there was "a real world, which was too alive and impassioned and resistant to be dissolved and transformed by art".

Certainly, every work bears in itself a temporal connotation, the index of a content not entirely transformed; but the more imperceptible this connotation makes itself, the more it becomes poetry, as way into the world. De Sanctis's form is, in fact, the announcement of the birth of the constantly new world of poetry.

6. De Sanctis's thought and work have exercised a significant influence on twentieth century Italian criticism and aesthetics. At times this influence has been cultural and ideological. There has been a De Sanctis as forerunner of Croce, a Gentilian De Sanctis, a De Sanctis as trail-blazer for Gramsci's programme. But, despite the use to which his thought has been put, one can say that an authentic De Sanctisian re-birth did occur above all in the late 1930s, when the recovery of poetics, despite the scant attention given them by Croce and Gentile, became an intrinsic part of Italian aesthetic research.

This *revaluation*, as Anceschi observed in *Le poetiche del Novecento in Italia*, occurred: a ) in the critical consciousness of twentieth century artists (in ideal continuity with what had been done by the great symbolist poets from Baudelaire to Mallarmé to Valéry); b) in idealist philosophy, with the revision carried out by Luigi Russo in his now classic work, *Problemi di metodo critico* (1929), or by Walter Binni, who in 1936, published a key text like *La poetica del decadentismo italiano*; c) finally, through the great turning point represented by the phenomenological school of Banfi.

The *revaluation* in some measure occurs *within* a cultural situation that is extremely open and problematic. One need only think of works like Ugo Spirito's *La vita come arte*, Galvano Della Volpe's *Poetica del Cinquecento* or Luigi Pareyson's *Estetica*, in which, from the perspective of the theory of formativity, strong emphasis is laid on the value of the poetic dimension which must animate and sustain *the formation of the work*.

The redemption of poetics in certain respects meant the rebirth of thought such as De Sanctis's which was fundamentally concerned with taking us inside the organic unity of art; in other respects it involved calling into question forms, intentions, analyses and procedures of general theories of art, above all neoidealistic theories, and Croce's aesthetics in particular.

7. The first edition of Antonio Banfi's *I problemi di un' estetica filosofica* (1946) opens with a long dedication to Mario Rossi, in which Banfi outlines the construction of a philosophy capable of grasping the multiform life of art and of rethinking -outside certain logicisms of the various schools -some fundamental problems of the artistic world. Banfi's project was also constructed as a *reply* to theories that consist of defining *an abstract aesthetic ideal of art*, which they presume to impose as a model. Philosophical idealism, declares Banfi, has forgotten the reality of art, its structural tension, its rootedness in the naturalness of the real; and above all it has confronted the problem of contemporary art without understanding it and without replying to it. Banfi's criticism refers not only to the artistic situation of the early twentieth century in Italy, but assails the very foundations of neoidealist aesthetics. Witness Gentile, for whom the world of art is not a cosmos distinct in itself, but "the series of works of art as positive actuality of the aesthetic a priori synthesis"; therefore the aesthetic principle, which does not have a univocal meaning - presenting itself one moment as form, the next as soul of the work of art, yet again as hidden divinity which takes hold of us - never succeeds in acquiring validity "as effective law of constitution of the artistic experience..." (A. Banfi, *I problemi di un' estetica filosofica*, Milan 1961 [2], p.52). And witness above all Croce, whose work



in the field of aesthetics must be regarded as going even beyond the bounds of his theory in general.

The criticism, then, that Banfi levels at Crocean and Gentilian aesthetics is intended not only to probe the complex points of Italian neoidealist philosophy, but to open the way to a phenomenological analysis of artistic making and a reflection on the modern.

Banfi also speaks of the battle fought by Croce and Gentile with different methods for a deeper speculative enquiry into cultural problems; but it was, a battle that was not completely won, mainly because neoidealism proved incapable of competing with other trends of thought which, from the end of the last century, had brought about a profound renewal of the structure and figures of modernity.

8. Here we would do well to turn from Banfi's analysis to a reconsideration of certain central questions in Croce's thought from the standpoint of contemporary reflection on art.

In *Contributo alla critica di me stesso*, Croce "narrates" the story of his studies, his reading and his passions. The first of these was De Sanctis, from whom he borrows certain fundamental features, such as the concept by which art "is not a work of reflection and logic, nor the product of artifice, but spontaneous and pure imaginative form". Then, Bertrando Spaventa and Hegel - a Hegel as interpreted and adapted by Marx and Engels; and, again, Herbartism, naturalism.

The bitter anguish (*aspro travaglio*) which led Croce to the construction of *L'Estetica* is articulated both by going beyond naturalistic logic through the logic of spiritual grades and by going beyond naturalistic transcendence through the criticism of literary genres, grammar, individual arts and rhetorical forms. Along the line of these enquiries, Croce poses himself the problem of the nature-art relationship, denying reality to the nature of art and "finding it everywhere to be not reality, but a product of abstracting thought". In this way he goes beyond the dualism of Spirit and Nature in the awareness "that true thought is simply thought, beautiful expression simply expression", whereas false thought and ugly expression constitute non-thought and non-expression, in other terms non-being "which has no reality outside the dialectical moment which places and dissolves it".

After the first edition of *Estetica* (1902), which still bears residues of naturalism and a sort of Kantian-derived classificatory topology of the forms of knowing, Croce discovered Hegel, whose doctrines he had previously "sampled". It was a decisive discovery, under whose sign (the year is 1905) the turning point was to occur regarding the essential foundations of thought followed up to

that time. More than the other works, the 1907 *Estetica* reveals the reasons for this change: in it, in fact, beyond the general anti-positivist disposition supporting it, there is a redefinition of certain concepts on which Croce had been working since 1893: the conceptual affinity between history and art; literary criticism as critico-aesthetic operation and not as a philological job of mere expository assessment; the autonomy of art. These ideas are pondered along with other concepts- such as philosophical economics which consecrates the category of the useful, formalism of a Kantian kind recovered for the purpose of establishing the moral, and Marxist materialism understood as canon of historical interpretation - each of these concepts is placed in the general theoretical order of the philosophy of the spirit.

9. Art, writes Croce at the beginning of the *Breviario di estetica*, is " what everybody knows it to be". A statement which might appear to tend towards phenomenology, intent as it is on understanding the empirical aspect of classifications of poetics and the arts. But the reference to the *communis opinio* is immediately dissolved in the definition of art as lyric intuition and of feeling as what gives coherence and unity to the impression: "intuition is really such because it represents a feeling, and only from that and above that can it spring. Not the idea, but feeling is' what confers on art the airy lightness of the symbol: an aspiration enclosed in the movement of a representation, that is what art is ... What we admire in genuine works of art is perfect imaginative form, which assumes there a state of mind; and this we call life, compactness, fullness of the work of art" (B. Croce, *Breviario di estetica*, Bari 1954 [12], p. 33).

Crocean *form*, unlike that of De Sanctis, which is achieved and realized within things, as *living spirit*, is to be seen as organism, "whose principle is the organism in itself", as autonomous space, free of concepts "and simpler than the so-called perception of the real". "The aesthetic act is, therefore, form, and nothing else but form" (B. Croce, "*Estetica come scienza dell' espressione e linguistica generale*", Bari 1965 11, p. 19).

In Crocean thought, there is no place for an empirical aesthetics, nor even for literary institutions, genres, the techniques of individual arts which figure rather as materials or "gatherings" that cannot be accounted for by science. Croce reasserts the autonomy of form which must be rigorously distinguished from any practical value, since it would be a mistake to pretend that the independence of art (the artist's inner intuition or expression) "must necessarily be extended to the practical activity of extrinsic manifestation and communication, which may either follow or not follow the aesthetic fact.....". (B. Croce, *Estetica*, etc., cit., p. 128)

10. There is, at the same time, *another* aesthetics originating and developing on the river-bed of symbolism; and which, through inhabiting an area distant from that of nineteenth century Italy, in many respects seems close in intention to authors like De Sanctis and poets like Leopardi. This is the aesthetics that originated in Poe's reflections, to be followed by Baudelaire and Mallarme, and achieve its most significant results in Valery.

Croce knew these authors, who figure in the *Storia dell' estetica per saggi*, in *Poesia e non poesia*, as well as in odd notes, in essays and annotations. But they were neither to his taste nor sensibility; they could not enter the domain of the idea of intuition and above all they could not be brought into the order of a philosophy constructed under the sign of distinguishing and systematizing. When he read the *Petite histoire des grandes doctrines litteraires en France* (1946) by Van Tieghem, who considered Valery one of the most profound aesthetologists of the twentieth century, Croce wrote an extremely cutting essay, in which he declared that the French poet "knew absolutely nothing of what since ancient times, and above all in the modern centuries since the Renaissance, had been sought and rediscovered and reasoned about poetry, art and literature". The study on *L' estetica di Valery* and the essays on Baudelaire and Mallarme' give us a clear and unequivocal idea of the meaning of Croce's reflection on the *modern*, which had overturned taste and tradition, and broken the continuity of tradition.

As for Mallarme's poetry, it was the product of affected obscurity, wilful construction and calculation; while his reflections on pure poetry had no theoretical legitimacy whatsoever.

Mallarme's theoretical fragility, in Croce's view, finds its landing stage in Valery, who did not understand what poetry is, who in fact hated everything that poets have felt within themselves as a "grace"; he thought that a poet could only be of value as a critic of himself. In short, Valery's aesthetics is a poetry-game, sustained by three elements: construction, full intellectual consciousness, the accident of invention...

These, quite clearly, are judgements which find legitimacy in a strongly theoretical aesthetics., which reads and interprets the forms and modes of literature from the perspective of a *logic of distinction*, and which is not concerned about "following" the evolution of the arts, their continuous transformations.

In these arguments, which have here been necessarily abbreviated, Croce showed that he had failed to grasp the meaning of the great modern revolution, not only because he had moved inside a *philosophical* and *literary* idea of art, but also because he had kept his eyes fixed on the past, on tradition. He had.

refused to measure his strength against that topology of the modern whose cipher Valery perceived with revelational, startling words when, in *The Conquest of Ubiquity*, he wrote: " Our fine arts were established .... in a very different time from ours, by men whose power we possess today. But the extraordinary development of our means, the ductility and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they have introduced make it inevitable that there will be imminent and extremely profound changes in the ancient industry of the beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical part which cannot be considered and treated as it has up to now, which cannot ignore the achievements of modern knowledge and capacities. For twenty years now neither material, nor space nor time have been what they had always been in the past. It is only a matter of time before such great novelties completely transform the technique of the arts, before they act with it on inventiveness itself, and even reach the point of marvelously modifying the very notion of art" (P. Valery, *La conquista dell' ubiquita*, in *Writings on Arts*, Italian tr., Milan, p. 107).

To modify the notion of art means to enter the scandal of modernity- the region of the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent.

11. Croce did not enter modernity. Perhaps he was afraid of losing himself there.

Contemporary aesthetics, when it has wished to confront Crocean thought, has placed it in a different setting -that of the great post-symbolist season, of the avantgarde, of hermeneutics, of phenomenology. And it is also that post-Crocean setting which, according to Gianfranco Contini, makes the order of the day literary criticism "as criticism of style"; and " a true practice of science' that does not leave it in its [.....] low, ancillary position in the hierarchy" (cf. G. Contini, *La parte di Benedetto Croce nella cultura italiana*, Turin 1989 2, pp.54-55).

The *objects* "posed by history" are, according to Contini, also key points of contemporary aesthetic thought. The exploration of that thought is often conducted tentatively - " It is not impossible", Valery foretold "that one day it will be conducted systematically".