

## One hundred years later: *Aesthetics* by Benedetto Croce, 1902-2002

There are many indications that Benedetto Croce was not particularly fond of his most famous, or at least the first of his famous books, *Aesthetics as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, which was first published in 1902. This point is demonstrated by the prefaces, written by Croce, to some of his following editions, notably the third edition in 1908, the fifth in 1922 and the seventh in 1941. All three of these prefaces indicate a distinct distancing of the author from his work. These prefaces call attention to the integration, modifications and the corrections that the theory underwent in Croce's other writings after its first formulation and indicates quite frankly the limits of that first treatment. In the preface to the third edition Croce writes: "I see many things clearer and more related today, or at least differently, particularly after having examined the various philosophical sciences (the reference is obviously to *Logic* and *Philosophy of the Practical: Economic and Ethic*) and I see certain perplexities and certain imprecise concepts, which exist in certain parts of *Aesthetics* [...] that would not have been written today". *Aesthetics, Philosophy of the Practical* and *Logic*, he added, "retain traces of the different periods in which they were written and were placed and must be considered in their progressive order of publication". As to the special questions of aesthetics, Croce then refers us to the collection of *Problems of Aesthetics*, which was released a short time later.

The preface to the fifth edition, written in September 1921, was even more radical in tone. After having once again referred to successive treatments - and here the reference is in a special way intended for *The new dissertations on aesthetics* which came out the previous year - Croce highlights the limits of formulating the historic part of the first aesthetics and the deficiencies in stating the problem of literary and artistic history and he talks about "tottering" which was eliminated from his following "self-criticisms". Finally, in the preface to the 1941 edition, Croce speaks of the "sense of mortification" that the book brought out in him "due to the inadequacies that I now see". The forward to the other volumes of aesthetics later written by Croce say more or less the same things, even if, obviously, in a more "positive" manner given that here he is looking at the past from the point of view of the development of his successive aesthetic theories.

The forward to *The new dissertations on aesthetics* is an example of this attitude: "If we must return to my first aesthetics (...) for criticism and the overcoming of the naturalistic, intellectualistic, sensualistic, moralistic, psychological, physiological aesthetics and so on, and the multiple prejudices derived from these factors, as far as what regards the full determination of the concept of art and the history of art, I pray that the reader bear in mind, above all, this new volume".

Here, as can be seen, Croce seems to narrow the value of the first aesthetics to its *pars destruens*. We shall come back to this point.

Perhaps, however, the biggest proof of the sentiments that tied Croce to his great *Aesthetics* is given in his book *Philosophy, Poetry, History*, which was published the year before his death. As is noted, it deals with a type of “personal anthology” in which the philosopher collects the “flower” of his work in a volume of more than a thousand pages. This collection was strongly requested by Raffaele Mattioli in order to inaugurate the series of Italian classics by the publisher Ricciardi, and was prepared by Antonello Gerbi. The passages were chosen by Croce himself. The volume bears the subtitle *Pages taken from all the works of Benedetto Croce* and that is *almost* true because, besides collecting chapters or sections from all of his major works Croce even collected pieces from his minor works, even pages of contingent polemics. However, in this vast, and for many, surprising work (viewed thusly by Gianfranco Contini), not one line comes from the first *Aesthetics*.

And yet that volume is not only one of the fundamental works of Croce’s philosophy, and not only has it had a determining role in the development of Croce’s thought, but it has also long been the principal vehicle for the penetration of Croce into the culture of the twentieth century. *Aesthetics* signals the beginning of Croce’s hegemony on Italian culture, a hegemony destined to last half a century and was Croce’s first widely read work. Of course, after this erudite debut, Croce had already become, through his studies on Marxism, a well-known author even beyond national borders. But in 1902, *Aesthetics* signalled Croce’s entrance into the “middle” culture of the era, which was primarily a literary culture.

The simple proof of the great success of the book, as has been said, is that there were nine editions published during Croce’s life (and some editions published a very large number of copies, which was not common for an Italian philosophical text). There were twelve editions published during the century just ended and the text has been published in various languages, not only in western languages but in less popular languages (three different translations were published in Japanese). The widespread popularity of *Aesthetics* played a very important role in placing Croce in a position between attachment to and distancing from his creation. It is not difficult to feel the sense of intolerance that such a prolific and multiform author, with all probability, experienced for a work that, by virtue of its success, established a partial and unilateral image that for many was destined to remain the only image of this author.

The extraordinary success that *Aesthetics* received, a success that has few if any comparisons in the history of this discipline, must not let us forget, however, that it deals with a work that had a decisive role in the development of Croce’s thought. It had this role independently

of its external success and for reasons that were totally intrinsic. When Croce reflects on *Aesthetics*, taking into consideration what that book meant to him and to his philosophy, the detached and impatient tone which we have seen changes into a very different tone. In *Contribution to the criticism of myself* Croce writes:

“It was by the harsh toil that *Aesthetics* cost me that I surmounted, for myself and by distancing myself from myself, the naturalism and *herbartism* that had still bound me. In other words, I surmounted naturalistic logic thanks to spiritual or developmental levels; in no other way succeeding to understand the relationship of words and logic, imagination and intellect, utility and morality. And I overcame the naturalistic transcendence through criticism of literary genres, grammar, particular arts and rhetorical forms which were irresistibly achieved, almost literally touching how, in the pure spiritual world of art, “nature”, which is the construction of the very spirit of man, is introduced. Having denied the reality of nature in art, I relaxed the road, contesting it all over and discovering it all over, not as reality but as a product of abstract thought.”

Croce places the discovery of one of the fundamental structures of his thinking, the connection between category and pseudo-concept, in the gestation of aesthetics. We will come back to this idea also, but in the meantime we notice that this declaration allows us to see the evolution of Croce’s philosophy under a different light. And in so doing he antedates a solution that in some measure would have otherwise been arrived at some five years later, in the writing of *Outlines of Logic*.

In actual fact, in writing *Aesthetics* Croce had to sketch out the entire system of what would become the *Philosophy of the Spirit*. *Aesthetics* contains, *in nuce*, the entire system of philosophy of the Spirit. In order to delimit the space of aesthetics, Croce had to cover the whole range of spiritual endeavour, show how the endeavour known as aesthetics distinguished itself from logical endeavour, from practical economic endeavour and from ethical endeavour. Approaching art through a series of successive deductions (art is that which is not logical knowledge nor practical endeavour) Croce was able to give much energy to the affirmation of the *autonomy* of the aesthetic fact, of the irreducibility of art to a different spiritual form. For Croce the autonomy of art is rooted in the same structure as the condition of possibility of our action and knowledge; thus obtaining a foundation on the transcendental plane. Art is not logical knowledge nor is it practical endeavour; it is impossible to evaluate it by a measure of moral judgement or reduce it to a didactic instrument. One can disagree with the manner in which Croce arrives at establishing the autonomy of the aesthetic fact, but it is difficult to deny that one of the elements that determines the success of

*Aesthetics* lies in the passionate claim of the irreplaceableness of the aesthetic moment within our own experience which is underlined by an energy rarely reached in the history of aesthetics.

In short, Croce arrived at philosophy through aesthetics. This is a very rare situation for great philosophers who normally deal with art only after they have dealt with the problems of knowledge or morality. They arrive at aesthetics as a complement to or a reflection of those problems which are imposed on them from other realms of experience. For Croce that was not the case: aesthetics was the central generator and the access road to his thinking, and for this reason received special relevance. But not in the sense that through aesthetics he attempted to solve other spiritual endeavours. The effort of *Aesthetics* is that of distinctly tracing the boundaries of the various spheres and preventing them from being superimposed upon or being confused with one another.

Let us now look at the structure of the 1902 work. We see right away that it is composed of a *Theoretical Part* and an *Historical Part*. This second part, more sizeable than the first, is also important, given that it deals with the first overall history of aesthetics written in Italy and is the fruit of ample information, most of which is first hand. Croce pronounces very precise, often very severe, judgements, (Labriola says that it is more a burial ground than a history), and in a prospective that he would later substantially correct. This, however, does not take away from the fact that its pages are often illuminating. René Wellek, in the middle of the twentieth century, considered it “the best” existing history of aesthetics. However, we will only deal with the first part, the theoretical part, written in eighteen short chapters whose content is easily put forth in its general lines by following the detailed table of contents that begins the work or the rapid final summary that is found in the last chapter. This last chapter deals with the identity of linguistics and aesthetics, in the theoretical part.

Croce read a first version of the theoretical part at the Accademia Pontaniana of Naples in the spring of 1900. In the two years that separate this first formulation of Croce’s aesthetics from the publication of the volume published by Sandron of Palermo, Croce had re-written the text of *Thesis of aesthetics* read at the Pontaniana, introducing substantial modifications and was devoted mainly to the writing up of the historical part. If we merely think of the term *intuition*, which was very important in the definitive version, we find the expression does not yet appear in the 1900 text where instead Croce spoke of *impression*.

In *Thesis* as well as in *Aesthetics* Croce is a convinced upholder of the *cognitive* nature of art. Art is a form of knowledge, an individual, intuitive knowledge. This is the corner stone of

Croce's aesthetics, to which he always remained faithful. The fact that art is theory and not practice was the fixed point from which Croce's philosophic thinking arose until, in his 1893 dissertation *History reduced under the general concept of art* he was able to demonstrate the identity of history and art, or better yet the identity of the principles to which both were traced back to, especially since he had affirmed the cognitive nature of art. Croce said both art and history are knowledge, although the knowledge of nature is different from scientific or philosophical knowledge. In *Aesthetics* the assertion of the theoretical, cognitive nature of art received strong emphasis from the fact that, in respect to the *Thesis*, it was moved to the beginning of the discussion and solemnly declared in the *incipit*:

“knowledge takes two forms: intuitive or logical knowledge; knowledge for the imagination or for the intellect; knowledge of the individual or of the universal; knowledge of things or knowledge of the relationship of things, and in the end it is the producer of images or the producer of concepts”<sup>1</sup>

Without reservation or specification, Croce immediately identified intuition and art. Art is not a special type of intuition endowed with specific qualities. All intuition is art:

“intuition of a very simple popular love song, which says the same as or a bit more than a declaration of love which falls from the lips of thousands of ordinary men at any give moment, can be intensively perfect in its simplicity, although extensively much more restricted than a love song by Giacomo Leopardi”.

In order to equate art with intuitive knowledge, Croce had to distinguish between intuitive knowledge and conceptual knowledge and dwell on the relationship that exists between the two types. At the time Croce still thought of that relationship as having a double level of implication (in the sense that intuition can exist without concept while concept cannot exist without intuition). This was so much so that when Croce arrived at thinking of spiritual forms as a *circle*, he also felt the need to restate his own aesthetics in accordance with a new way of understanding the relationship between the four fundamental forms: which gave fruit to *Breviario di Estetica* in 1912.

This is the subject of the first three chapters. The following two, the fourth and the fifth, examine the errors that are produced due to the lack of or unclear distinction between the two levels of knowledge, intuition and concept. The vein of the discussion is taken up again in the sixth chapter, where theoretical endeavour and practical endeavour are distinguished; the first the producer of knowledge, the second action. And as in the theoretical sphere, Croce distinguishes two levels (intuition and concept), thus in the practical sphere he distinguishes a first level (truly

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<sup>1</sup> From the first edition (1902). In subsequent editions, except for the third, after “things” we add “single”.

useful or economic endeavour) from a second practical level, which is moral action. There exists, therefore, between the theoretical and the practical spheres, a precise parallel, a homology: economics is like aesthetics in the practical sphere (Chapter VII). Regarding this point, it can be noted that if Croce later looked again deeply at this recognition between the autonomy of economics (and thus also at politics) and morals, the functional similarity of economics and aesthetics is a firm point, and already in 1931 he would dedicate an essay to *The two worldly sciences, aesthetics and economics*, in which the analogy between the two is reaffirmed on the basis of the common historical event. Therefore both “modern” sciences, aesthetics and economics (in Croce’s broadest sense of the terms include in themselves politics), were able to arise when the diffidence towards the sense, or sensitivity, began to fall and therefore both are a stance against transcendence, both are anti- ascetic sciences and intrinsically profane.

Thus the four fundamental endeavours of the Spirit, the discussion of which Croce would develop during the ten following years in *Logic* and in *Philosophy of the Practical. Economic and Ethic*, were set. The volume written in 1902 goes on to negate the fact that other fundamental forms could exist; meaning that the other endeavours (for example juridical, religious or mythical) could be brought back to their beginnings which were founded in one of the four categories. Their beginnings being identical to those just seen: law is essentially an economic endeavour, religion or myth cognitive endeavours, etc.

All of the following chapters except the last, which as we have said, examine linguistic and aesthetic identity and affirm the linguistic character of all artistic productivity and the fact that speech is essentially the liberal creation of the speaker, is productivity and is infinite expression. All the chapters, from IX to XVII, are dedicated to eliminating from the aesthetic field, what Croce considers “errors” of or “deviations” from the theory of art. Much of the material considered established and traditional of the aesthetic manuals of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, specially the German ones, suffers. Croce directly attacked meaning, that for aesthetic evaluation covered rhetoric with its figures and rules, criticized the classification of aesthetic sentiments and in general contested the need to introduce the notion of sentiment into aesthetics. He contested the validity of an entire series of concepts that belonged to a tradition that was more consolidated in aesthetic thinking and which formed its backbone (the concepts of tragedy, comedy, the sublime etc.). As if all of this were not enough, Croce put some of the most rooted convictions of common sense applied to the life of the arts in difficulty. The first of which being, the conviction itself that there are different forms of art and that they are classifiable in common indices; poetry, painting, sculpture, architecture and so on. For Croce, a work of art is an *internal* fact, a spiritual fact, and

the artistic process is concluded in a dimension that is merely psychic. The artist fixes his intuition on a material support or he translates it into matter, which only serves to communicate it to others, to permit others to walk the path that he has already walked. The differences among the arts are merely the different physical means, and have no relevance to the aesthetic experience. The same is true for classifications that subdivide works from the single forms of art in general. The literary genres (sonnet, ballad, historical novel, short story etc.) and the visual arts (landscape, historical painting, portrait painting) only serve to find their bearings in a practical sense. They serve to order books in a library or pictures in a museum but have no use whatsoever when we are dealing with forming an aesthetic judgement. We can therefore understand why many aesthetic theoreticians, faced with Croce's book, were disconcerted: they felt as if the earth was slipping away from under their feet, and that many of the traditional problems of their discipline were being excluded and declared groundless.

Considering the structure of the 1902 edition of *Aesthetics*, we note certain important points. For one thing, both *pars construens* and *pars destruens* are clearly present. With respect to the first, the *pars construens*, we have already been able to note certain things; for example, a strong affirmation of the autonomy of the artistic factor and that said affirmation is obtained by a process of successive deductions (that which is art is not knowledge, nor morality, nor economic endeavour) that present certain analogies with the way in which Kant identifies the characteristics of the concept of taste in the third Criticism.

Let us add two observations. Croce's aesthetics was born as a philosophy book, as a project of systems, but is viewed, above all, as an isolated book. Many will read the aesthetics outside of Croce's philosophic system, drawing from it an overall defining formula of facile use and application, but far from the complexity of the problems Croce started from and to which he tried to give an answer. The common opinion in much Twentieth century Italian thought is that Croce's aesthetics, which is "not very philosophical" – an opinion that is reinforced by the polemics of Gentile and the Gentile school which followed – is difficult to explain if we observe the materiality of the text, while it is easy to explain if we look at its reception.

The second observation does not regard the reception of Croce's aesthetics, but rather its internal characteristics that truly has great importance. Looking at art in terms of intuition-expression (and the stress of the first aesthetics falls on the first term, while the vernacular of Croce's thought accentuates the second), Croce refers to the original eighteenth century sense of aesthetics as the science of sensitivity, restoring a vastness to aesthetics that the nineteenth century

tradition had forgotten. Speaking of intuition, Croce referred to the German eighteenth century master line of aesthetics, which started with Baumgarten and led to Kant. Like the Kantian *Anschauung*, Croce's intuition is clearly separated from concept and not distinct from it by mere degree of clarity, as is evident in the Leibnizian tradition in which Baumgarten is associated. Unlike Kantian intuition, Croce's intuition, like that of Baumgarten, is in itself knowledge and does not always need the intervention of concept to transform itself into knowledge, as Kant wanted.

More than these aspects, it was the polemical parts of Croce's book, his *pars destruens* and especially his great exclusions, that made an impression on his contemporaries. It was his refuse of literary genres, of rhetorical categories, of traditional concepts of the history of aesthetics, of every distinctions of the arts, etc. which struck them. We have already mentioned the impression of novelty and near bewilderment that this caused. But we must also note that all of this is rooted in a profound exigency of Croce's philosophy, in an extremely characteristic and meaningful view of Croce's way of thinking.

It is often said the Croce's philosophy is interested in establishing great categorical divisions, a philosophy that exhausts itself in separation and in the definition of great fields of experience, aesthetics, logic, economics and ethics. It is also said that Croce is interested in the universality of principle and that his demonstrations always take the form of the reduction of the empirical differences to the uniqueness of the category. This is true, but it is only a part of the truth. At the root of Croce's position there is not only the desire to found artistic endeavour on a transcendental plane, showing the universality and the omnipresence of the category or the principle, but also a very distinct claim of the infinite variety and diversity of artistic factors and the individuality of the expressive acts, that is just as strong.

Croce's great exclusions are not born solely from the fact that Croce emphasizes the category into which it is reduced in every aesthetic consequence, but also the desire not to level the differences by gathering the works under partial generalizations. That which is gathered half-way between the universality of the category and the infinite richness of the real (abstraction, empirical concepts, classes), falsify the inexhaustible diversity of the individual factors. To speak of a literary genre, for example, means to sacrifice all that is innovative and not ascribable to a scheme which is contained in every authentically successful work, it means to forget that every work of art shifts and modifies the concept of genre in which we try to insert it. That is why Croce could rightly put detailed criticisms within the area of aesthetics in relationship to the classification of the arts, to rhetorical figures, to artistic genres with the profound structure of his philosophy, with the connection pure-concept versus pseudo-concept. Far from creating an isolated episode, those



criticisms incarnate one of the central themes of Croce's philosophy, the fundamental structure of his logic. It is not totally true therefore, to hold, as is commonly done, that the notion of pseudo-concept arose following *Aesthetics*, through the reflection on one hand of Hegelian philosophy and on the other of epistemology of conventionalism. Without a doubt these stimuli acted upon Croce, but they found fertile ground in the complex field of aesthetics. A passage from *Contribution to the criticism of myself* has already been cited in which this has been clearly stated, but even in *Logic* of 1909 Croce affirms a similar idea, declaring that it was through the very writing of *Aesthetics* that he "understood the true relationship between philosophy and science and the two together liberated him from the waste of intellectualistic and naturalistic method".

We are used to regarding Croce as a custodian of humanistic memory, an intellectual traditionalist and a conservative. We can argue whether this is true for Croce's work in general and if this image effectively captures the historic function of his formidable cultural works. What is true is that the 1902 *Aesthetics* gives back to us a figure who is light years away from this commonplace: the image of a subverter of tradition, of a liberator.<sup>2</sup> *Aesthetics* actually acted as a form of liberation; liberation from rules, from canons and from norms. At the dawning of a century where art was freed from any model, freed from any heritage of classicism, Croce as a literary critic as well as a theoretician, would *later* call on classicism, and would condemn the road that art had taken from Romanticism onward, but in *Aesthetics* he affirms the absolute freedom of art. The 1902 *Aesthetics* is not a book of mediation or of continuity, it is a radical text.

We have already touched on this idea of radicalism and it is worth looking at again in closing. For the 1902 Croce all, and I repeat all, intuition is art:

"The limits of expression-intuition, which are called art as opposed to those which are vulgarly called non-art, are empirical: it is impossible to define them. An epigram belongs to art: why not just a simple word? A short story belongs to art: why not a journalistic news story? A landscape belongs to art: why not a topographic drawing? [...] There is not one science of small intuition and another of great intuition, of common intuition and another of artistic intuition, there is but one aesthetics, the science of intuitive or expressive cognition, which is the aesthetic or artistic factor".

Afterwards, of course, many other things would come. The philosophy of Croce would be expressed and would be studied in depth, his instruments and his analyses would be sharpened. Many of the difficulties left open from the first aesthetics would be worked out and a solution

<sup>2</sup> M. Capati in his *Il maestro abnorme. Benedetto Croce e l'Italia del Novecento*, Firenze, Pagliai Polistampa 2000 insisted on this aspect of Croce's first *Aesthetics*, and in my opinion rightly so

offered. The 1902 edition of *Aesthetics* did not lack aspects that were insufficiently worked out. For example, the way in which the problem of judging works of art was faced was completely inadequate; at this chronological level it was still identified with the reproduction of a piece of work or the solution offered to the problem of literary and artistic history.

A separate discussion would be needed to look at the critical endeavour that Croce systematically undertook once *Aesthetics* was completed. He applied himself first to contemporary Italian literature and then he dealt with the great poets of European literature, Ariosto, Goethe, Shakespeare, Corneille, Dante. One thing can be said: Croce's criticisms were more traditional, with the idea of art as an expression of sentiment and with a poetry-non poetry opposition. Very often in his literary criticism Croce expressed his *moral* dissatisfaction with the modernity of the world. Croce's literary criticism is less open than his aesthetics.

And for this reason, reading the 1902 edition of *Aesthetics* today, without letting oneself be influenced or conditioned by the prevalent current opinion of Croce, the reader I believe, is destined to receive a very strong impression. If philosophy means looking at things with new eyes, perceiving the truths that, in their apparent simplicity and naturalness, unhinge deep rooted habits of thought, then in this work, which in many ways is immature with its dry and even stiff prose, is even more distant than can be imagined from the noble grandiloquence of Croce's later works, but also from the elegance of works such as *Logic and The Philosophy of the Practical*, it is possible to hear the sound of the beating of wings of great philosophy.