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Thoughts on Reading Croce's Theory of Aesthetic

STEPHEN L. ALLEY

In accordance with the plan of the poem of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the entrance to the Inferno "is by a gate bearing an announcement partly explanatory and partly terrifying. The moralist begins to exercise his judgment and to graduate the sins and vices of mankind. He places the lazy, the timid, the perpetually irresolute, unfit for good or evil, almost out of this graduation, according to a fantastic law of retribution. Contempt envelops them, and their true punishment is in the verses which score them forever: 'these wretches who never were alive'; 'who lived without infamy and without praise. . .'; 'displeasing to God and to His enemies. . .'; 'who made through cowardice the great refusal. . .'; 'let us not speak of them, but look and pass on. . .'"¹

There is another category which I have felt aestheticians have desired to cast beyond the pale: the inartistic. Croce rescues them in the second chapter of his book *Theory of Aesthetic*. He identifies the aesthetic or artistic fact with intuitive or expressive knowledge, taking works of art as examples of intuitive knowledge and attributing to them the characteristics of intuition and vice versa. I find this frank identification startling for, to pursue its implications, it would seem that there is no difference in species between intuition and the artistic sense, and perhaps not even any difference in intensity. And so it proves to be to Croce, for he says, in contradiction to those who thought that art is intuition but that intuition is not always art and that artistic intuition is a distinct species differing from intuition in general by something *more*:

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¹Benedetto Croce, *The Poetry of Dante* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1922), pp. 105-106.

It has sometimes been thought that art is not a simple intuition, but an intuition of an intuition, in the same way as the concept of science has been defined not as the ordinary concept, but as the concept of a concept. Thus man would attain to art by objectifying, not his sensations, as happens with ordinary intuition, but intuition itself What is generally called *par excellence* art collects intuitions that are wider and more complex than those which we generally experience. These intuitions are always of sensations and impressions.

Art is expression of impressions, not expression of expression.² While agreeing with Croce that this process of raising to a second power is perhaps inappropriate—he says that it does not even exist—is it not the case that surrealistic art in its unceasing search for more vital expression may be attempting that very thing, the raising to a second power, the objectifying of an intuition rather than a sensation? Croce goes on to deny that artistic intuition differs from ordinary intuition of the simplest popular love song and the complex intuition of a love song by Leopardi, although the former is, naturally, so much more limited extensively. What then is the difference? “The whole difference is quantitative,” says Croce, “and as such is indifferent to philosophy.” It is just that certain men have a greater aptitude and a more frequent inclination fully to express certain complex states of the soul, and these men are called artists.

This seems like a minimizing of a vastly important distinction—a minimizing that lends substance to the illusion or prejudice that we possess some more complete intuition of reality than we do; that, to put it into popular parlance, we have many great and beautiful thoughts in our minds but that we are just not able to express them. Nonsense, says Croce. We never have had those thoughts if we are not able to express them. He says that people commonly think that all of us ordinary men imagine and intuit countries, figures, and scenes as painters do, and bodies as sculptors do but that painters and sculptors know how to paint and to carve such things while we bear them unexpressed in our souls. Nothing, Croce insists, can

²Benedetto Croce, *Theory of Aesthetic* (London: Vision Press, 1922), pp. 12-13.

be more false than this view. Raphael was Raphael not only because he could express the intuitions he had, but also because he had those intuitions.

The Cult of the Aesthetic

Repeated often enough to give rise to a suspicion that the book has a proselytizing motive is the thesis that Aesthetic has been withdrawn from humanity. The author's preface (in which he notes that the volume is composed of a theoretical part—herein reviewed—and a historical part, the two forming independent but complementary parts) first gives a hint of his feelings in this respect. "If language is the first spiritual manifestation and if the aesthetic form is language itself taken in all its true scientific extension, it is hopeless to try to understand clearly the later and more complicated phases of the life of the spirit when their first and simplest moment is ill-known, mutilated, and disfigured."

But before pursuing this thesis, I think it useful to present more of the Crocean concept of the Aesthetic. Aesthetic is, he says, the science of art, but it is more than that. It is also the language of art, the science of intuitive or expressed knowledge which is the aesthetic or artistic fact. But this is a labored definition and not as illuminating as the concept he describes in these words, "And this Aesthetic is the true analog of Logic, which includes, as facts of the same nature, the formation of the smallest and most ordinary concept and the most complicated, scientific, and philosophical system."³

Croce tells us in elaborating the subthesis of the false cult of the Aesthetic that "the cult of the genius with all its attendant superstition has arisen from his quantitative difference having been taken as a difference of quality," and will not admit that the word *genius* or *artistic genius* has any more than a quantitative signification. He notes that it has been forgotten that genius is not something fallen from Heaven, but humanity itself, and those who claim unconsciousness as the chief quality of an artistic genius hurl him from an eminence far above humanity to a position far below it. Intuitive or artistic genius is always conscious, keenly so, and perhaps lacks only the reflective consciousness of the historian or critic, which is not essential to it.

Other errors have contributed to the false cult. Some of them have come from those men who first had some suspicion of the close connection between Aesthetic and Logic. They conceived, so Croce thinks, Aesthetic as a Logic of sensible knowledge and were peculiarly addicted to applying logical categories to the new knowledge. Thus they talked of "aesthetic syllogisms," etc. Croce, however, recommends that Logic be freed from Aesthetic forms, rather than applying Logic to Aesthetic.

He opposes, too, Aesthetic hedonism, which looks upon the aesthetic as a simple fact of feeling and confounds the pleasurable expression (which is the beautiful) with the simple pleasurable and all its other species. Among these species of hedonism is the theory that the beautiful is that which pleases the highest senses—that is, sight and hearing. The refutation is simple. Croce shows that the aesthetic fact does not depend upon the nature of the impressions and that all sensible impressions can be raised to aesthetic expression but that none need of necessity be so raised. He adds slyly that anyone who holds that the aesthetic fact is something pleasing to the eyes or to the hearing has no defense against the person who consistently proceeds to identify the beautiful with the pleasurable in general and includes in Aesthetic the activity and result of cooking or "the viscerally beautiful."

He criticizes the theory of play, the idea that the aesthetic arises only when man begins to play (that is, when he frees himself from natural and mechanical causality and works spiritually). He points out that this makes the aesthetic function a game and every game an aesthetic fact. He further rejects the notion that the explanation of Aesthetic can be found in the origins of the human race in rejecting the theory that the pleasure of art can be deduced from the echo of that of the sexual organs. He scoffs at the confidence of those who find the genesis of the aesthetic fact in the pleasure of "conquering" or in the wish of the male to conquer the female. He rejects, too, the less vulgar current of thought which considers Aesthetic as the science of the sympathetic, as that with which we sympathize; which attracts, rejoices, arouses pleasure and admiration. All of these species of hedonism he rejects, not

being able to do otherwise and be consistent with his stand against philosophical hedonism in general.

As a refutation to hedonistic theories, the theory that art is "pure beauty" has often been advanced. Croce applauds the concept of a beauty "free from all that is not the spiritual form of the expression" but is unable to conceive of a beauty mystical and transcendent, nor one that should be "purified of expression" or severed from itself.

Errors of Other Theories

In his chapter on "Historicism and Intellectualism in Aesthetic" Croce reveals the errors of a series of theories which have been or are presented as theories of Aesthetic.

First among these theories is a theory of the "probable" as the object of art, where probability no longer means the artistic "coherence" of the representation, its completeness and effectiveness, its actual presence, but where it is taken to mean the historically credible, or that historical truth which is not demonstrable but conjecturable, not true but probable. Croce requests that the word *coherent* be substituted for *probable*, and says that then the discussions and judgments of the critics who use the theory will make better meaning. In addition to the historically credible, sometimes the reproduction of historical reality has been imposed upon art, which is another of the erroneous forms taken by the theory of the "imitation of nature." Here too is the spectacle afforded by verism and naturalism of a confusion with the processes of natural sciences of the aesthetic fact by aiming at some sort of an experimental drama or romance.

Croce criticizes another idea concerning confusion of art with the philosophical sciences. He attacks the notion that it is the task of art to expound concepts to represent ideas or universals, declaring that art cannot be put in the place of science, or rather that the artistic function in general must not be confused with the particular case in which it becomes aesthetico-logical. In like manner, he claims false the theory of art as supporting *theses*, or the aesthetic theory of the *typical*, when by type is understood the abstraction of the concept, and it is affirmed that art should make the species shine in the individual. Don Quixote is taken as the example of a type. But, Croce

asks, a type of what? Of all other Don Quixotes? A type, so to speak, of himself? Certainly not, says Croce. Is he a type of abstract concept such as the loss of a sense of reality or of a love of glory?

He continues to correct the errors of the theory of the use of the symbol and the allegory, and of the theory of artistic and literary kinds, the last being characterized as "the greatest triumph of the intellectualist error." Symbol and allegory are "expressions eternally added to another expression." The theory of artistic and literary kinds is attacked and destroyed thoroughly bit by bit in a manner that reminds one of the sowing with salt of the Carthaginian soil.

Externalization

Croce dislikes the persistent tendency of humanity to categorize and to analyze. One has the feeling that he regards the tendency as characteristic of minds too small to retain and comprehend the whole in its unity. The persistence of critics who praise the "new technique" of a writer or a dramatist is particularly irksome to Croce, who points out that the "new technique" is precisely the new novel or new drama itself; or, in the case of a painter, the new picture itself, and nothing else. He wants understood that *technique* is the complex of various kinds of knowledge preceding the volitional fact of the externalization of aesthetic vision, and not the distribution of light in the picture itself—as the technique of a dramatist is his dramatic conception itself.

Technique is further defined as the "knowledge at the service of the practical activity directed to producing stimuli to aesthetic reproduction." The possibility of this knowledge is what has led minds astray to imagine the existence of an aesthetic technique of internal expression leading to the doctrine of the "means of internal expression," a thing, Croce says, altogether inconceivable. The reason for its inconceivability is that expression is a primary theoretic activity preceding practice and intellectual knowledge illuminating practice, and is really independent of both.

Restating his delineation of the function of technique, he says that the production of physical beauty implies a vigilant will which sees that certain intuitions are not lost and which

acts either rapidly and instinctively or after long and laborious deliberations. The practical activity thus enters into relations with the aesthetic as a really distinct moment of it and not a simple accompaniment. This practical activity, if the externalization of the aesthetic vision is willed, must be preceded by technique, the complex of knowledge necessary to the externalization. By inference the technique may be acquired by anyone with the physical aptitude and ability; one must be born with the vision. But what of him who is born with the ability to intuit but has never acquired the knowledge, the technique necessary to externalize his intuition? Then is he not one of those earlier identified by Croce as not-artists? Or is he not a Raphael without the technique to become Raphael? Croce denies the existence of such people, saying that Raphael—the artist—is the artist precisely because he possesses intuition which we ordinary men do not, and says further, that if such intuitions are possessed they are expressed. Or, if not expressed, they were not possessed in the first place. Then again, what of the man who has intuition but not technique? Unless one accepts the Crocean dictum that he does not exist, one is driven into a *cul-de-sac*. By his admission that technique is necessary to externalization of aesthetic vision, Croce is driven to deny that intuitions can exist without expression, or what is the same thing, that the artist can exist without expressing himself. Presumably then, the converse is true that within many men the artist lies latent, not expressing, not intuiting, until aesthetic vision is awakened by effort to express and by the acquisition of technique.