

BENEDETTO CROCE AND THE NEW CRITICS *

In this paper I attempt three things: first, a fairly close examination of some of the underlying similarities between the aesthetic theories which originated with Benedetto Croce and those later promulgated by the New Critics; second, a consideration of the basic differences between these theories; and third, a look at how these differences are reflected in the practical criticism of both.

Professor René Wellek, in an essay entitled « Literary Scholarship », speaking of the New Critics maintains that « the importance of Croce's *Aesthetic*, though not clearly traceable, must be assumed as background ».¹ And Professor Gian N. G. Orsini in his admirable book, *Benedetto Croce, Philosopher of Art and Literary Critic*, says, « In spite of differences there is a much broader area of agreement than is generally suspected ».²

Both Croce and the New Critics have reacted against the materialism and mechanism of the age, protesting against a view of life and knowledge that rested on fact and influence from fact alone (CVM, pp. 53-56).³ Their protest took the form of an insistence on literature as a valid form of knowledge and as a communicator not of truths of other kinds of language, but of truths incommunicable in terms other than those of

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1. MERLE E. CURTI, (ed.), *American Scholarship in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1953) p. 122.

2. GIAN N. G. ORSINI, *Benedetto Croce, Philosopher of Art and Literary Critic* (Carbondale, Illinois, 1962) p. 9.

3. *I'll take my stand: the South and the agrarian tradition* by twelve southerners (New York, 1962), *passim*.

the language of literature (E, p. 21).⁴ Both aimed at and defended the independent status of poetic creation. Both insisted on the intrinsic value of imaginative literature: this stands by itself; it is not subordinate or subservient to any other human activity, but is produced according to its own laws (E, p. 4). This general conviction has assumed several individual forms and variations. Some spoke of the « autonomy of poetry », some, as in the case of T. S. Eliot, of an « autotelic » nature.

It must, however, be noted that this position was taken by Croce as early as 1902, the year in which the *Estetica* was published. In his system of the « Philosophy of the Spirit », Croce provides an independent sphere for the art activity as distinct from any other kind of human activity.⁵

The theory of « contextualism » — that is, the concept of the organic unity of the work — expounded in I. A. Richards' *Philosophy of Rhetoric* and the basis of so much of the rhetorical criticism of the New Critics, was first formulated by Croce as a philosophical proposition as far back as 1899 (Au, p. 63). It is the « intensive manifold » of T. E. Hulme. Cleanth Brooks makes constant use of this principle in his book *The Well Wrought Urn*, and cites Wilbur M. Urban's book on the philosophy of language, which in turn derives directly from Croce, as the author himself states in explicit and faithful referrals.⁶ Mr. Brooks' position in his book that the unity of the work lies in the basic metaphor which underlines it or in « the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordi-

4. Cfr. « Literature as Knowledge » in ALLEN TATE, *Collected Essays*, (Denver, 1959). In the essay, « The Present Function of Criticism » Tate writes: « Literature is the complete knowledge of man's experience, and by knowledge I mean that unique and formed intelligence of the world of which man alone is capable ».

5. The four volumes which comprise « The Philosophy of the Spirit » are: *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (1902), *Logica come scienza del concetto puro* (1909); *Filosofia della pratica, economia e etica* (1909); *Teoria e storia della storiografia* (1917).

6. CLEANTH BROOKS, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York, 1947), p. 232. « Urban insists, 'holds with special force for the aesthetic intuition. Here it means that form and content, or content and medium are inseparable ».

nated to a total and governing attitude »⁷ is similar to Croce's central generating motif or total poetic image (ASC, p. 32).

For both Croce and the New Critics a poem and its language are identical (E, 155). In their criticism both « look solely and steadfastly at the object », though the object is somewhat different. For I. A. Richards « the critic must be adept at experiencing the state of mind relevant to the work of art he is judging; he must be able to distinguish experiences from one another as regard their less superficial features; and he must be a sound judge of values ».⁸ For Croce, criticism is the exercise of the critical judgment based upon the complete re-creation of the poetic act of expression (PdE, pp. 154-55).

What are the basic differences between Croce and the New Critics? The fundamental distinction to be made is that Croce is a philosopher, a systematic thinker and an unswerving consistent theorist and organicist who over a period of fifteen years (1902-1917) worked out his own conception of the life of the spirit in *The Philosophy of the Spirit*, which comprises four volumes on aesthetics, logic, ethics and historiography.

In the volume on aesthetics he laid down the foundations of a genuine science of literature, not in the naturalistic or positivistic sense, but in the philosophical sense of a body of organized knowledge, a system of principles and applications. Art for Croce is a form of spiritual activity (E, p. 10), « Spirit » implies self-consciousness, awareness, immediacy. Art is a cognitive activity; that is, a kind of knowledge consisting in the cognition of the individual as such (E, p. 21). Not only poetry, but all imaginative literature results from a spiritual activity which produces an individualized image, or the cognition of a particular (E, p. 7). This activity Croce calls « intuition » (E, p. 3). This is his first doctrine. The object of intuition is the particular, while the act itself is universal. In other words, intuition is not a purely private affair; it is a universally human process.

7. *Op. cit.*, p. 187.

8. I. A. RICHARDS, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York, 1959), p. 114.

The process of intuition is the act by which the image is formed. The image may be a singular image or a *nexus* of images, which the poet binds into a whole; and the whole is an individual; that is to say, something which cannot be further analysed without being destroyed. *Only* the individual is expressible or effable: *solum individuum effabile* (NSE, p. 78). This individual image is not concrete until it is externalized into words. The image expressed into words is identical to the intuition; that is, the expression is the intuition and the intuition is the expression (E, p. 11). Not only the image is necessary to art, but also emotion; therefore the intuition is a lyric intuition. This is Croce's second doctrine (B, p. 30). In the *Essence of Aesthetics* (1912) Croce speaks of art as « an aesthetic synthesis a priori of emotion and image in the intuition » (EA, 26).

Later, in an essay published in 1918, « The Character of Totality of Artistic Expression », Croce extended his doctrine of the lyrical intuition in the third doctrine of the cosmic intuition by which « artistic representation, even in its form, which is supremely individual, embraces the Whole, and reflects the cosmos in itself » (NSE, p. 119). More specifically, this means that « every genuine artistic representation is itself and the universe, the universe in that individual form as the universe » (NSE, p. 122). « In every poetic accent, in every imaginative creation, there lies all human destiny — all the hopes, the illusions, the sorrow and the joys, the greatness and the wretchedness of humanity, the entire drama of reality, that grows and develops perpetually upon itself, suffering and enjoying. It is therefore unthinkable that artistic representation may ever affirm the mere particular, the abstract individual, the finite in its finiteness » (NSE, p. 126).

The fourth doctrine of Croce's aesthetics is the distinction that he makes between poetry and non poetry or literature. We shall return to this later in this paper.

For Croce, the historicist, only history can provide us with true knowledge because concrete reality can be reached only through perception of the individual fact or historical

knowledge (CVM, p. 62). Hence the great importance given to history in Croce's methodology. The erudite philosopher Croce can never be separated from the historicist Croce.⁹ Before undertaking the discussion of any problem whatsoever, Croce will first procure the most accurate knowledge possible concerning the particular problem. This he does by resorting to its previous history in all its possible aspects.¹⁰ This historicism in Croce is almost completely lacking in the New Critics except for its implication in such essays as « Tradition and the Individual Talent » by T. S. Eliot, and in the book by Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*.

In contrast to Croce the New Critics lack a body of doctrines, a systematic theory, a definite technique and methodology. Murray Krieger in his book *The New Apologists for Poetry* sets out with the good intention of finding answers to the theoretical problems of the New Critics by beginning with the artifact itself and gets nowhere so far as concerns working out a consistent aesthetics for the group: this is like trying to build a house by starting with the roof and looking later for the foundation.

In *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1928) which inaugurated the New Criticism, I. A. Richards failed to recognize a world of aesthetic values. Scientific psychology and science were for Richards in his early stages what history was for Croce. Richards' theory of critical analysis led to a complete divorce between the poem as an objective structure and the reader's mind.

The influence of T. S. Eliot on criticism in the United States corresponds to that of Croce in Italy. The concept of the « objective correlative » in his essay on *Hamlet* is as important as Richards' psychological analysis and is possibly the « key » to a great deal of the New Criticism. In the essay Eliot writes:

9. FAUSTO NICOLINI, *Croce* (Torino, 1962), p. 83.

10. *Ibid.* p. 84.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in the sensory experience are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.¹¹

This formula has the following implications: 1) that a poem is the « objective correlative » of an emotion; 2) that having understood the series of words that compose a poem, the reader can evoke the emotion immediately. It follows, therefore, that the analysis of the emotion and the analysis of the words that evoked it are the same; in fact, aesthetically the two are inseparable — thus the formal analysis of the poem as verbal object.

Poetry is thus reduced to *the poem* and is completely cut off from all knowledge and even from reference to reality. This constitutes an extreme example of a criticism « outside of history » since it accepts *en masse* all the negations established by modern aesthetics of the last one hundred and fifty years. The New Critics have progressively abolished all ties that art has with nature, and the theory of art as imitation. They have abolished all ties that art has with thought, and therefore with philosophy; all ties that art has with science, with psychology, with life in general, and with the personality of the artist in particular; of art with history, with society, with religion; of art with the practical, and with politics, with morals and the Good. And finally they have negated the connections among the words that compose a poem and give it its meaning. It is this last step that associates the New Critics with all the European Currents of *la poésie pure* of Paul Valéry. A work of art is not, then, in this system preeminently a product of the « intuition », which expresses reality, but to the contrary, an elaboration of the critical spirit, which tends to demolish exterior reality and to create a new reality. For the New Critics the identification

11. T. S. ELIOT, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York, 1932), pp. 124-25.

of form and content is not *a priori* in the intuition as with Croce; on the contrary, it takes place in the contact with the medium which the artist uses. While for Croce to make a statue is a practical fact, the « externalization » (*estrinsecazione*, E, p. 122) of the intuition in order to communicate it to others, for Eliot the medium, is the coming together of the emotion with the object which becomes its correlative. Hence the importance of the medium for the New Critics. Language here has the function of engendering a new reality. If it does not engender a new reality it comes up against a void or will mistake the void for something new, the absence of the object for the object itself. Where Croce found the universe, the New Critics *un vide*.

In a recent interview I. A. Richards explained that he considers aesthetics and literary criticism subjects in which it is not possible to reach any sound conclusion and looks upon his work of over twenty years in this field as little more than a youthful error.¹²

This dilemma had already been recognized by Croce in the second volume of his « Philosophy of the Spirit », the *Logica come Scienza del Concetto Puro* (1909):

If being is conceived as external to the Spirit, and knowledge as separable from its object, so that the object could be without being known, it is evident that the existence of the object becomes a positum, that is something placed before the Spirit, given to the Spirit, extraneous to it, which Spirit could never appropriate to itself, unless it were to take courage and swallow the bitter mouthful with an irrational act of faith. But all the philosophy which we are now developing, shows that nothing is external to Spirit, and therefore there are no posita opposed to it. These very conceptions of something external, mechanical, natural, are revealed as conceptions not of external posita, but of the position of the Spirit itself, which creates the so-called external, because it is useful to it to do so, reserving to itself the power to annul this creation when it has no more use for it (L, p. 110).

12. ANTONIO RUSSI, *L'Arte e Le Arti* (Pisa, 1960), p. 165.

I have said earlier in this paper that literary criticism for Croce is the exercise of critical judgment based upon the complete re-creation of the poetic act of expression. Criticism for Croce not only implies a philosophy; it is a philosophy. In the *Nuovi Saggi di Estetica* he writes, « Criticism is judgment, judgment involves a standard of criticism, a standard of criticism involves thinking a concept, thinking a concept implies the connection with other concepts, and a connection of concepts is, finally, a system of philosophy » (NSE, p. 201).

The critic, in Croce's view, needs both native sensibility and historical knowledge: he must, as far as he is able, re-express the expression of the artist: and in order to do this, in addition to a detailed knowledge of the circumstances surrounding the artistic production, he needs a keen intellectual ability for analysis of critical problems (NSE, pp. 223-224). He does not reproduce the art object: he operates on a distinctly different level from that of the artist. His method is intellectual and logical. But this is not yet criticism; so far the critic is only *artifex additus artifici*; he must be *philosophus additus artifici*. He must possess a concept of what is a work of art, (PdE, p. 53) so that turning to imaginative recreation of the individual work, he may judge how far the qualities which it possesses are those of art, how far he finds it moves into spheres of other activities which have nothing to do with art (NSE, pp. 79-80).

Once a work is definitely assigned to the aesthetic sphere, it can be studied as the embodiment of an image expressing an emotion or a state of mind. The focus is now on the work as an individual synthesis of form and content, of image and emotion. The goal of criticism, then, is to define the motif, or the *macchia*, the lyrical impulse or the central generating poetic image (PdE, p. 250). This « caratteristica » of both poetic personality and the works of an artist « will show how an artist will in his beginnings try to imitate previous art, whether near or far removed in time or place, how in this imitation he will introduce more and more contradictory elements, the stronger his own personal temperament turns out to be, and how, at

last, he will find himself and create something original » (NSE, p. 171). Croce produced many essays or monographs of « characterization » which focus sharply on this one problem he considers essential. The critic's task, then, is to grasp, to describe and thus implicitly to evaluate this individuality, this uniqueness. But before undertaking the criticism of any artist, Croce, the historicist, will consider the « criticism of the criticism » of the artist, thus clearing the ground and paving the way for his own interpretation (ASC, p. 207). In the volume entitled *Poetry and Non-Poetry* the distinction made between the two is the same distinction Eliot makes in his essay on the metaphysical poets between the felt-thought and thought without emotion and feeling, except that Croce goes further and conceives the felt-thought as a *humanitas* (LP, p. 11). He theoretically states in *Aesthetica in Nuce*, « The basis of every poetry is the human personality, and since the human personality completes itself in morality, the basis for every poetry is the moral consciousness ».¹³

As a result of the tragic dissociation from the world about them, the New Critics were led to focus their attention on language, the only link they had with society. The medium, so incidental in the aesthetics of Croce, became their unique concern. The « structural properties » of a poem and its « poetic strategy » were their chief field of operation.

They had a slim theory formulated in an essay, « The Bases of Criticism », by John Crowe Ransom, who, in answering an attack on the New Critics from the Neo-Aristotelian group of the University of Chicago, based his discussions on Mr. Charles W. Morris' three irreducible dimensions of the meanings of meaning; namely, the syntactical dimension, involving all that can be said of the logic of a poem (its paraphrase or logical structure); the semantical dimension, the « bold and dense imagery or the idealized imitations of Aristotle »; and finally the pragmatological dimension, the final causes or human uses of

13. *Aesthetica in Nuce* (1928) translated in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed. (1929) S. V. « Aesthetics » p. 165.

a poem, which Ransom rejects. The formula, then, for the New Critics was the following: « It is only by determining the syntax of the argument that we can throw into relief the dystax, the imagery of the poem, though this dystax in as proper to the poem as the syntax is proper to the argument, being the character of a discourse which is poetical ». Or in other words, « if critics would make it their procedure to determine the syntactical requirements of the poem only in order to go on from there and figure its actual dystax,... they would take leave with their glance lingering not upon the paraphrase of a poem but upon a poem ».¹⁴

This initial dichotomy later took different forms such as distinctions between the structure and the texture of a poem, its conscious and unconscious intentions, the micro — and macro-structures, the denotations and the connotation of words, the determinate and indeterminate meanings, and so on. This dualism is an example of the results of that analysis and dissection of a poem which is anathema for Croce. Cleanth Brooks sought desperately for a synthesis of form and content which is basically Crocean.

The similarities — or what seemed to be similarities — between Croce and the New Critics mentioned at the beginning of this paper have been finally warped and distorted so as to be unrecognizable.

In short, the New Criticism deals almost exclusively either with the expressive techniques of poetry or with the general techniques of language, and the poem becomes a sort of experimental mouse. The New Critics have been men gifted in penetrating private symbolism and in elucidating language. How all of this represents « the whole soul of man brought into activity » remains a mystery. The poem, instead of being « a source of delight » became a problem to be solved, an excuse for mental acrobatics and a springboard from which a precept or presupposition was launched.

14. *The Sewanee Review*, LII, 4 (Oct-Dec. 1944).

Croce has summed it up beautifully from his point of view in *La Poesia*: « By breaking up the forms of poetry into words and metaphors, similes and figures, syntactical groups and metrical patterns, and so forth, one does not get at the character of the poem, which can only be reenacted and contemplated in the total intuition; one only succeeds in heaping up a miserable pile of dead fragments, mere shards » (LP, p. 124).

AIDA MASTRANGELO

ABBREVIATIONS

- ASC *Ariosto, Shakespeare e Corneille*, 5th ed. (Bari, 1961).
 AU *Benedetto Croce, An Autobiography*, translated from the Italian by R. G. Collingwood (Oxford, 1927).
 E *Estetica*, 10th ed., (Bari, 1958).
 EA *Essence of Aesthetics*, translated by Douglas Ainslie (London, 1921).
 CVM *Cultura e vita morale*, 2nd ed., (Bari, 1926).
 L *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, 7th ed., (Bari, 1947).
 NSE *Nuovi Saggi di Estetica*, 4th ed., (Bari, 1958).
 LP *La Poesia*, 5th ed., (Bari, 1946).
 PDE *Problemi di Estetica*, 5th ed., (Bari, 1954).