

BENEDETTO CROCE AND THE HISTORY OF ITALIAN LITERATURE (SECONDARY PUBLICATION)¹

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Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), one of the leading Italian thinkers of the 20th century, was also a prolific literary scholar. According to Croce himself, the definitive version of his literary theory is found in his magnum opus *La poesia* published in 1936 (PE: 30). This book is notably dedicated to the poet Carducci and the literary historian De Sanctis. In connection with this dedication, Croce states in his preface:

In writing this book I have always been reminded of the teachings I received, starting in my early adolescence, from the books of Francesco de Sanctis and Giosue Carducci, two masters who, through different routes and in dissimilar manners, concurred in imbuing in Italians a more forthright and austere consciousness of what poetry is. The dedication to their memory came naturally to me. (P VII)²

Croce dedicated *La poesia* to Carducci because, as discussed in another article (Kunishi 2016: 39-42), he found in this man the ideal image of the poet for his own poetic theory. Accordingly, in what sense is the name De Sanctis mentioned here?

Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883) was a scholar active in the *Risorgimento* period, as well as a politician involved in the politics of the nascent kingdom of Italy, especially in the field of education. He was one of the greatest scholars of Italian literature in the nineteenth century, writing outstanding

¹ This article is based on a study first reported in Japanese (*Studi di lingua e letteratura offerti a Kei Amano*, a cura di K. Kunishi, Y. Shimoda e Y. Murase, Dipartimento di italianistica dell'Università di Kyoto, 2018).

² All translations from Italian here-after are mine.

essays on Dante, Petrarch, Leopardi, and others. His masterpiece *La storia della letteratura italiana* (1870-71, *History of Italian Literature*) is considered the most successful history of Italian literature ever written. In this book De Sanctis depicted the development of Italian literature, from the Sicilian School to his contemporaries, as a single flowing “storia” (story/history). In this respect, *La storia della letteratura italiana* is an emblematic literary work of the nineteenth century, in which the writing of a history of literature was one of the most popular methods applied in studies of literature.

Speaking of which, did Croce, profoundly influenced by the author of *La storia della letteratura italiana*, also write a history of Italian literature himself? Getto, who worked on the development of Italian literary histories, addresses this question as follows:

Croce never purposely wrote a history of Italian literature, but his collaboration in an accomplished account of the development of our literature was of extreme importance. It is worth noting in the meantime that his numerous essays devoted to poets and writers of Italy could form an almost complete picture of our literary history. (Getto 2010: 259)

Getto points out two things here: 1) Croce did not write a history of Italian literature, and 2) his contribution to the study of the history of Italian literature was nevertheless extremely significant, especially in forming the general picture of that history.

Regarding the first point, it can be better understood by referring to the eminent scholar of the theory and history of literature, René Wellek. According to Wellek, Croce did not dare to write a history of literature, because he routinely “attacked the concept of literary history as an evolutionary process” (Wellek 1981: 12-13) and “criticized severely what he called the sociological concept of literary history” (Wellek 1981: 13). Moreover, based on these ideas, Wellek finds one of the methodological differences between Croce and De Sanctis:

Nothing is further from his [De Sanctis’s] mind than a Crocean denial of the possibility of

literary history, for he thinks all the time in totalities and continuities, sometimes in ways that offend our sense of reality. (Wellek 1965: 119)

According to Wellek, then, Croce totally rejects De Sanctis's methodology of literary studies³. Is this drastic conclusion literally acceptable?

In considering this question, it is useful to take into account Getto's second point: Croce did conduct research on the generalities of Italian literature. From this point of view, the existence of the posthumous works entitled *La letteratura italiana: Per saggi storicamente disposti* is significant. This book in 4 volumes, compiled by Mario Sansone, includes Croce's literary studies of all periods. In fact, their first (Sansone 1965a) and second volumes (Sansone 1965b) cover, respectively, the 13th-16th and the 17th-18th centuries, while the third (Sansone 1963a) and the fourth (Sansone 1963b) deal with the 19th century and contemporary literature. Here can be seen the tendency of Croce's literary studies toward an overall picture of Italian literary history.

Thus, Croce's attitude toward the concept/methodology of "literary history" remains somehow ambiguous, at least as far as the history of Italian literature is concerned. In other words, Croce's attitude as a theorist who denies the possibility of a "history of literature" seems to coexist with his attitude as a critic who tries to portray the whole picture of Italian literary history. This paper, tracing Croce's career from these two aspects, that of literary theorist and that of literary critic, examines what kind of attitude he concretely took toward the "history of literature" in each instance.

1. "History of Literature" in the 19th Century

Before examining how Croce himself viewed the history of literature, it would be useful to define the expression "history of literature." For this

³ The other difference that Wellek points out between De Sanctis and Croce concerns the value of realism in literature.

purpose, one does well to refer to Getto, who defined it:

That inquiry aimed at examining not individual personalities or particular moments of a specific literary civilization, but the whole complex unfolding of that civilization. (Getto 2010: 5)

It is a definition close to what we usually refer to when we use the term “history of literature”⁴.

In this sense, it was in the 19th century that the “history of literature” came to occupy the most important place in literary studies⁵. This was probably due to the emergence of the progressivism of the Enlightenment or Hegel’s philosophy of history. The awareness that history represents a single developmental movement must have served as one of the prerequisites for the writing of a history of literature. Although some literary histories written during the first half of the 19th century had a style of *Weltliteratur* such as Friedrich Schlegel’s *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* (1815, *History of Ancient and Modern Literature*)⁶, more typical were those about national literature such as Georg Gottfried Gervinus’s *Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* (1835-1842, *History of the Poetical National Literature of the Germans*) and Emiliano Giudici’s *Storia delle belle lettere in Italia* (1844, *History of Literary Works in Italy*). The rise of the nation-state consciousness following the Napoleonic Wars may be one of the most important influences for the writing of these national literary histories.

In the late 19th century, with the development of positivism, the natural scientific approach to historical writing flourished. Positivism, which

⁴ This paper uses the expression “history of literature” as a synonym of “literary history”.

⁵ Cf. Jauss (1970: 144). However, there are several literary histories written in the late 18th century such as Thomas Warton’s *The History of English Poetry* (1774-1781) or Girolamo Tiraboschi’s *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1772-1794, *History of Italian Literature*). Moreover, in the case of French literature, it would be better to say that this phenomenon belongs to the turn of the century rather than the 19th century (cf. Compagnon 1983: 22).

⁶ As another example one could cite *Handbuch einer Allgemeinen Geschichte der Poesie* (1832-1833, *Handbook of a General History of Poetry*) of Karl Rosenkranz, who is believed to have influenced De Sanctis.

explained various phenomena based on the correspondence between cause and effect, posited that literary works could also be explained by their environmental factors. Histories of literature were then written as a part of socio-political histories. Typical examples are Taine's *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1864, *History of English Literature*) and Lanson's *Histoire de la littérature française* (1894, *History of French Literature*). The subject of this paper, De Sanctis's *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870-71) also belongs to this period.

At the close of the 19th century Benedetto Croce began his scholarly career. How, therefore, did Croce react to the general tendency of literary studies described above? The following chapters chronologically examine Croce's works of literary criticism as well as aesthetic treatises and consider how his conception of the history of literature changed (or did not).

2. "History of literature" in *La critica letteraria* and *Tesi fondamentali*

At the end of the 19th century, Croce's central task was the exegetical study of history and literature⁷. However, in his 1894 essay *Critica letteraria* (*Literary Criticism*), Croce presents a theoretical discussion of literary criticism. In it, he also expresses his observations about a "history of literature":

Nor can a history of literature be the most uncertain of the parts of history, because the literary work is not scarcely reduced to the social sentiments and ideas from which it arose; greater are the difficulties encountered in explaining the origin of those ideas and sentiments, or the ultimate and hidden motives of human actions. In any case [...] it is important for us to hold for now, that the possibility of a history of literature, as of any history, is not in question. (PS: 112)

⁷ In his 1893 article *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte* (*History Brought Under the General Concept of Art*), Croce discusses the relation between art and history, but he does not express his considerations about "literary history".

Remarkably, Croce clearly affirms the possibility of writing a history of literature. Moreover, he even states that literary works are part of the history of social thought (“ideas and sentiments”). On the one hand, this discourse is highly compatible with De Sanctis’s method of literary study. On the other hand, it is divergent from what, according to Wellek and Getto, Croce would stand for about the history of literature.

In the following passage of *Critica letteraria*, there is a reference to the “development” (*progresso*) of literature:

And if I consider the historical conditions that preceded and accompanied those art forms, I will see what merit and demerit accrues to the individual producers. Thus, by way of example, Arcadian poetry will appear to me as a progress in relation to the decadence of the literary form, which the *secentismo*⁸ with its pursuits of effect had caused; and the Romantic drama will appear as a progress in relation to the prejudices and strictures of pseudo-Aristotelian poetics. (PS: 112)

Appealing to the need to evaluate works of art in their historical context, Croce argues that this allows one literary current of a given period to represent a development of another literary current of a preceding period. From this argument, it can be surmised that, as early as 1894, he was somehow in favor of a progressive interpretation of the history of literature.

In 1900, six years after *Critica letteraria*, Croce presented *Tesi fondamentali di un’Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale* (*Fundamental Propositions of an Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic*) at Accademia Pontaniana. This is well known as a landmark work in which Croce’s epoch-making theories first appeared: the identification of “intuitional recognition” (*conoscenza intuitiva*) with “art”, the principle of “autonomy of art”, and so on.

In *Tesi fondamentali*, Croce divides all the activities of the human spirit into “cognitive activity” (*attività conoscitiva*) and “practical activity” (*attività pratica*): then he divides the former into “intuitional cognition” (*conoscenza*

⁸ Tendencies in the art and literature of the 17th century

intuitiva) and “theoretical cognition” (*conoscenza teorica*), and the latter into “economic activity” (*attività economica*) and “moral activity” (*attività morale*). Based on this scheme of four categories of the spirit, Croce argues first that “art” is nothing but “intuitional perception”, and then that “art” should be strictly distinguished from natural phenomena and from the other three activities of the spirit. Croce called this characteristic of art “the autonomy of art”.

Tesi fondamentali is also the first work in which Croce mainly examines art. When Croce uses the word “art”, he tends to regard it as a unified concept, without emphasizing the distinction between genres. However, as specific examples of “art”, he often refers to literary works and the writers who create them. This is also the case in *Tesi fondamentali*, where Croce’s considerations on the history of literature are presented in a discussion on the history of “art”:

It is quite arbitrary to place the history of the artistic production of humankind above a single progressive line, as the pattern theory claimed: for which humankind would progress as it approached given patterns and would have partial regressions as humans deviated from them. The history of aesthetic products surely presents cycles of progress, but each with its own problem, and progressive only with respect to that problem. Neither Shakespeare progressed on Dante, nor Goethe on Shakespeare; but Dante advanced on the medieval authors of visions; Shakespeare on the playwrights of the Elizabethan era; and Goethe on the writers of the *Sturm und Drang*. (TF: 15)

On the one hand, Croce rejects the history of literature that develops on a “single progressive line” from beginning to end, while on the other hand, he does affirm a development that follows “cycles of progress” for each period and theme. Now he clearly rejects the unidirectional progress of the history of literature which he postulated in *Critica letteraria*. However, he still affirms the possibility of a history of literature in the sense that he places literary works within a historical period and discerns a kind of development among them.

Croce’s masterpiece *Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica*

*generale (Aesthetic as Science of Expression and General Linguistic)*⁹, published in 1902, consists of a “theoretical section” based on the contents of the *Tesi fondamentali* and a “historical section” tracing the history of aesthetics. Although the considerations about the history of literature in *Estetica* are basically an extension of those in *Tesi fondamentali*, two points are newly discussed: The history of science, which develops in a linear way, is referred to as a comparison (ESE02: 156), and the word “regression” is juxtaposed with the word “progress” (ESE02: 157). Generally, however, it can be said that there are no significant differences between *Tesi fondamentali* and the *Estetica*.

3. “History of Literature” in *Note sulla letteratura italiana nella seconda metà del secolo XIX*

In 1903, Croce launched the critical journal *La Critica* and began his literary criticism in earnest. From the first issue until that of 1914, Croce wrote a series of articles entitled *Note sulla letteratura italiana nella seconda metà del secolo XIX (Notes on Italian Literature of the Second Half of the 19th Century)*. In its introductory article (*Introduzione*), there is a statement indicating the purpose of this series:

Each of its [this journal’s] installments will contain articles, notes, contributions, documents, ordered and converging to one purpose: to prepare the material and to attempt a first outline of the history of Italian literary and scientific production of the last half century. (I: 4)

While it is declared here that *La Critica* will focus on “literary and scientific production of the last half century” (the second half of the 19th century), Croce himself would actually write the reviews of literary works, leaving “scientific production” to Giovanni Gentile, Croce’s collaborative

⁹ There are some significant differences between the editions of *Estetica*. In this paper I refer to the first edition to reconstruct the precise chronological order.

philosopher as well as close friend. Particularly noteworthy is Croce's declaration that the purpose of the publication of this journal is to present an "outline of the history". Comparing this with his remarks on the history of literature in *Tesi fondamentali* (and in *Estetica*), it can be said that the purpose of the serialization, as stated in *Introduzione*, is compatible with Croce's aesthetic theory of the period.

The first issue of *La Critica* also contains the initial installment of the *Note*. This article, which is a review of works of the poet Giosue Carducci, reflects Croce's concept of a history of literature at the time. The first chapter of the article contains his views on the transition of Italian literature from the first half of the 19th century up to the emergence of Carducci. At the end of that chapter, Croce argues:

Now, from the time of that diagnosis to the present day, many efforts have been made, many spirits have searched, and not a few have been reached and found. Taken as a whole, it would be unfair to deny that the last period of our literature is far more serious and substantial than that which immediately preceded it. To begin the critical review of literature of this period, we cannot but start with the most conspicuous and representative author of modern Italian literature, the first in order of value and time, i.e., Giosue Carducci. The complete collection of his works, recently published and so gladly and eagerly received, invites us to attempt to determine the place of his works in the general history of Italian literature (leaving aside petty criticism and digressions). (GC: 12)

Here is a discussion in a historical way of Italian literature in the mid-19th century. This is an implementation of Croce's views on the history of literature at the time, which attempted to discuss the literature along historical lines. It can be said that the scheme in which Carducci is placed inside the flow of Italian literature in the mid-19th century is similar to the specific examples given in *Tesi fondamentali* (Dante and medieval poets, etc.).

4. From *Note* to *Breviario di estetica*

Throughout the series in question, which continued until 1914, Croce's conception of the history of literature seems to have undergone a major transformation. This is shown in the concluding article (*Licenza*) of the series:

Even the history of poetry and art in general has its drama, its dialectic, its unfolding; otherwise, it would not be history. But it is a dialectic-unfolding-drama of each author or each endeavor of art: the author is always faced with an inert or rebellious matter, and either he overcomes it, or he submits to it and is defeated; whence the struggles, the victories, the defeats, the points of perfection, and the decadences of artists. (L: 83)

Croce here, while setting dialectical development as a necessary condition of history, insists that the “dialectic” of the “history of poetry and art” is complete in individual artists and their works. This idea is based on Croce's new theory presented in the essay *L'intuizione pura e il carattere lirico dell'arte* (*Pure Intuition and the Lyrical Character of Art*) published in 1908. In this article, Croce emphasizes the distinction between “intuitive perception” (=art) and “conceptual perception” (=thought), explaining the former as individual and the latter as universal. Based on this theory, Croce argues that it is possible to perceive a historical flow of “conceptual cognition”, such as the development and evolution of ideas in a certain society, but not a history of “intuitive cognition” beyond the framework of individual artists and works of art. In the following section of *Licenza*, Croce writes:

The historian of literature must turn his gaze to such a dialectic, and keep alive the consciousness of his limitation. When he is not satisfied with this dialectic proper to the particular works of art in front of him and tries to see a dialectic of the relations of one work to another, the form of the works of art will be broken and a transition will be made from the history of literature to a social and philosophical history. (L: 83)

Croce still uses the expression “history of literature”, but his definition

is quite different, not only from the general meaning (defined in Chapter 1 of this paper), but also from what Croce himself was discussing a decade earlier. Incidentally, it is an interesting fact that Croce does not quit using the word “history” (*storia*), despite his emphasis on the individual author and work as forming a complete world. The relationship between “art” and “history” in Croce’s mind at that time is shown in his *Breviario di estetica* (*Introduction to Aesthetics*), written in 1912, just before the end of the series of *Note*. Croce states:

True art criticism is certainly an aesthetic criticism, but not because it disdains philosophy as pseudo-aesthetics. Rather, because it operates as philosophy and the conception of art. Moreover, it is a historical criticism, but not because it adheres to the extrinsic of art, like pseudo-historicism, but rather because after availing itself of historical data for the fantastic reproduction (and so far it is not yet history) and, having obtained that it is fantastic reproduction, it furthermore makes itself (*si fa*) history, by determining what is that fact (*fatto*) reproduced in its imagination, e.g., by characterizing the fact with a concept and by establishing what, properly, is the fact that happened. (NSE: 84)

Here can be seen the influence of Giambattista Vico’s philosophy of history, which Croce had been studying since around 1908. In *Breviario di estetica*, however, Vico’s interpretation of history as *factum* is re-elaborated: Croce’s conception of history now deviates from the general framework of diachronic history by associating that conception with works of art. The considerations presented in *Licenza* are theoretically explained in this passage of *Breviario di estetica*.

In *Breviario di estetica*, by the way, while Croce emphasizes the autonomy of art and artists, he intimates the existence of literary expressions which do not belong to art:

It’s not artistic the virtuous and Catholic allegory that Torquato Tasso composed for his *Jerusalem*, or the patriotic declamation of Niccolini and Guerrazzi, or the subtleties and conceptualizations that Petrarch introduced into his rhymes; but Tasso’s allegory is also one of the manifestations of the work of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Latin countries; the Niccolinian and Guerrazzian declamations are violent attempts to incite the spirits of

the Italians against the foreigner and the priest, or adherence to the fashion of inciting; the subtleties and conceptualizations of Petrarca, a cult of traditional troubadorian elegance, revived and enriched in the new Italian civilization; and they are all, that is to say, practical facts, historically highly significant and worthy of respect. (NSE: 85)

Here is the list of specific examples of various literary expressions that do not qualify as art. Croce's thesis could be resumed as: there are both "art" (= "intuitive perception") and "non-art" (= "practical facts") in literary works, and the former cannot be incorporated into history in the general sense, while the latter can (and must) be incorporated into historical narratives.

In the quoted passage above, although Croce does not explicitly state it himself, he uses the expression "history" in a double sense: on the one hand, there is the history of authors and works that should be called artists or art, respectively, and on the other hand, there is the history of authors and works that should NOT be called artists or art.

5. Universality and Historicity of Art

In 1918 article *Il carattere di totalità dell'espressione artistica (On the Totality of Artistic Expression)*, Croce discusses the universal nature of "art":

The artists of genius, the poets of talent, the great works and pages—that is, all that alone counts in the history of poetry—are not subject to disease or general tendency. The great poets and artists convene, in that luminous sphere, from every country and every epoch, and are welcomed citizens there and recognize themselves as brothers. (NSE: 125)

This passage illuminates the idea that true art transcends time and society. This is a step further than Croce's previous view that dialectical development is inherent in the works and artists as we identified in *Licenza* or his other works of the same period.

The "true art" being defined in this way, it is naturally impossible to write a general history of literature that analyzes the works of authors according to the trends of the times. Moreover, the same principle applies to Croce

as a literary critic. During this period (1918-1921), Croce publishes a series of separate studies on Ariosto, Shakespeare, Corneille, and Dante. While in *Note* (1903-1914) he took a literary-historical approach at least in methodological terms, these reviews of four classic poets are in all aspects individual research works.

In the meantime, however, Croce also writes a series of articles devoted to a specific period, the 19th century. Remarkably, works and authors discussed in this book are not exclusively Italian but rather European. It means that Croce's "history of literature" is no longer diachronic, as it used to be: It becomes instead synchronic. In 1923, the articles of this series are published as a book by the Laterza publishing house. The book title *Poesia e non poesia* (*Poetry and Non-Poetry*) is very suggestive: Croce selects the most prominent European writers of the 19th century and attempts to draw a distinction between the true, timeless works of art ("poesia") and the literary expressions that have been lost to the currents of the times ("non-poesia")¹⁰.

After the publication of *Poesia e non poesia* Croce's major research interest shifts from the "history" of art, which has universal value, to the history of cultural events that can be placed in the category of practical activities. *Storia del Regno di Napoli* (*History of the Kingdom of Naples*) is published in 1925. Next, in 1928, *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915* (*History of Italy from 1871 to 1915*), and in 1929, *Storia dell'età barocca in Italia. Poesia e letteratura - Vita morale* (*History of the Baroque Period in Italy. Poetry and Literature—Moral Life*). In these historiographies, especially in *Storia dell'età barocca in Italia*, taking up literary works as cultural events, Croce discusses them as a part of "history" of various times and places.

In 1929, he also publishes an important treatise on aesthetics, *Aesthetica in nuce* (*Essentials of Aesthetics*), in which he shows anew his views on the "history of literature". In the passage where he discusses the history of art and literature, Croce points out that from the Romantic period to his own

¹⁰ This Europeanism of Croce can be seen also as a reaction to the excessive nationalism which caused the First World War.

time, the prevailing research style was to read and interpret works of art as responses to the social demands of the times. Subsequently, after explaining that this methodology can overwhelm the individual characteristics and appeal of artists and works of art, he goes on to say:

Practically speaking, the truth is that this method is combined with and moderated by the other, which could be called “individualizing” and which emphasizes the individual character of works; but a “mix-for-moderation” has the vice of all sorts of eclecticism. To avoid this problem, there is no other way than to carry out the individualizing history in a consequential way and to treat works of art not in relation to social history, but each as a world of its own. In such a world, all histories flow from one time to another: The history is transfigured and surpassed by imagination in the personality of the artist, in the individuality of the poetic work, which is a creation and not a reflection, a monument and not a document. Dante is not merely a document of the Middle Ages, nor Shakespeare a document of the Elizabethan era: As a document of an epoch, we can find many others equal or more abundant in information among bad poets and non-poets. (US: 38)

Here is a kind of inversion of the idea of “history”: The history, according to Croce, is formed by studying separately each complete work of an artist. While a new idea of history was only suggested in *Breviario di estetica*, here, in *Aesthetica in nuce*, it is presented clearly as a “history” that is special to art.

6. Two Kinds of “History of Literature”

Poesia popolare e poesia d'arte (Folk Poetry and Poetry of Art), published in 1933, is a collection of essays on Italian literature from the 14th to 16th centuries. In the preface, there is again a sentence that reveals Croce’s attitude toward “history of literature”:

With the present collection of essays on Italian poetry from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, I present another piece of my “History of Italian Literature”. I often receive from different people a courteous offer to write a book with such a title. However, I do not know how to yield to the work of compilation, which is inevitable to greater or lesser

degree when one tries to compose a textbook or other similar encyclopedic expositions: This is, however, what is commonly desired below such a title. (PPPA: IX)

Here, Croce first states that the expression “history of literature” generally indicates “work of compilation” like that of a “textbook” or “encyclopedia”, and then denies that he himself composes any “history of literature” of that kind. What, then, does Croce intend to write in this book? He explains it himself in the same passage:

For my part I intend by “history of Italian Literature” the investigation, the discussion and the clarification of those points, those authors and works, of our literature, which I consider, in my sense, insufficiently clarified so far. After all, this is the only thing I can provide here. (PPPA: IX)

Thus, Croce’s own goal is the presentation of the “history of literature” not as a “work of compilation”, but rather as a study that aims to address unresolved issues concerning individual literary works and authors.

In the preface of *Poesia popolare e poesia d’arte*, Croce presents another, related objective: to “highlight the gap” (PPPA: X) between “folk poetry” and “poetry of art” and to show the role of “culture” in the birth and growth of poetry. According to Croce, the purpose of his critical activity over his final few years has been the struggle to defend “poetry that is not an intellectual or practical construction, but nothing more than a force of imagination” (PPPA: X). And thus, the “thought, culture, and experience that enhance poetry” (PPPA: X), which are distinct from poetry, have been mistakenly perceived as negative in themselves. Therefore, Croce says, he takes it upon himself to reexamine their value.

The “thought, culture, and experience” mentioned above must refer to the various literary expressions categorized as “not poetry” in *Poesia e non poesia* (he does not state it clearly, perhaps to avoid further misunderstanding). In other words, it can be said that Croce is attempting to write a “history of literature” as a cultural history by taking up literary expression as a part of

culture. It could be confirmed here that Croce presents two different types of “history of literature”: that which contains works of poetry with universal value on one side, and that which discusses the literary works representing the culture of each epoqe on the other.

La poesia, mentioned in the lead paragraphs of this paper, is a book published in 1936. In this monumental work, there can be found a clearer version of Croce’s concept of “history of literature”. Here Croce argues that there are two types of literary works: “poetry” and other “literary expressions”. According to Croce, then, each of those two categories requires a completely different way of being narrated historically. Regarding the study of “poetry”, Croce states:

What really matters is that the analysis of the poem/poetry be intrinsically (i.e., logically) monographic, always referring to the concreteness of the individual works. (P: 139)

The assertion that the study of “poetry” must be an individual study is a repetition of what Croce has sustained so far, but in *La poesia* the discussion about the “history of poetry” goes further:

The recalled poem is rather an integral part of human history, which would be mutilated and incomprehensible without its poets; but it offers no document to extra-poetic history, such as that of philosophy or politics or moral life. (P: 139)

Here Croce explains that, on the one hand, the study of a poem must be individual as long as the poetry is an individual expression, and, on the other, this kind of study, in turn, becomes a part of integral history. This is a major development compared to the theory of the independence of artists and their works from history reached by Croce in the 1910s. In *La poesia*, Croce declares that what the universal work of art (i.e., “poetry”) contains is a comprehensive history. Moreover, Croce discusses the possibility of a different kind of history for artistic expressions that are not included in the category of poetry:

Nevertheless, one should not lose sight of the fact that, beyond works of poetry, there exist works of anti-poetry, that is, ugly things, and works of non-poetry, that is, literary works. Both well offer documents to that [cultural] history: the former because they have been configured to ugliness caused exactly by the interference of both practical and intellectual interests, and the latter because they do not resolve and dissolve these interests in themselves, but clothe them in beautiful form in the oratory, the entertainment literature, effusions and the literary prose of philosophy, history, and sciences. (P: 139-140)

He argues that both “works of anti-poetry” and “works of non-poetry” should be reworded as “literature” and incorporated into the cultural history.

Thus, in *La poesia*, Croce presents two kinds of “history of literature” more clearly than ever before.

7. Denial of De Sanctis’s Approach to “History of Literature”

The two kinds of “history of literature” articulated in *La poesia* are then put into practice in Croce’s literary criticism: in *Poesia antica e moderna* (*Ancient and Modern Poetry*), published in 1941, Croce discusses “poems” and “poets” of universal value, transcending time and nationality, from Homer and Vergil to Lope de Vega and Baudelaire. On the other hand, the “literature” as an expression of time and society was taken up in the 1949 book *Letteratura italiana del settecento* (*Italian Literature of the 18th Century*). It is noteworthy that, with this work, Croce’s study of Italian literature covers all periods after Dante.

Tracing his career as a literary critic, it could be said that Croce has written, as “cultural”, diachronic histories limited to Italy, while he has written, as universal, a “history of poetry”, for which neither time period nor nationality are taken into consideration¹¹. Thenceforth, Croce’s original

¹¹ Throughout his entire career, Croce does not focus on the literature of Oriental countries: This fact seems to be caused by practical limitations (e.g., Croce was unfamiliar with non-European languages).

literary theory, which he has developed through years of research, was fully realized by his own hands. When his literary theory was completed by his own critical works, Croce may have felt that he had overtaken his “teacher” De Sanctis.

In 1950, Croce publishes his last major work, *Lettura di poeti, e riflessioni sulla teoria e la critica della poesia* (*Readings of Poets, and Reflections on the Theory and Criticism of Poetry*), which includes both literary criticism and theoretical reflections. In the theoretical part of this book, there is a chapter¹² (LP: 237-246) wholly devoted to the “history of literature”:

And I repeat first and foremost that it is absolutely not true that I have “denied the history of poetry and literature” as the absurd rumor sounds, but, on the contrary, that I have asserted, against the false form of that history, the genuine and true form of it. (LP: 237)

It is particularly noteworthy that Croce himself asserts in his last works that he has not repudiated the “history of literature”. In other words, if Croce denies the history of literature, he refers to it only in the general sense: Croce rather affirms the “history of literature”, presenting his own ways of rendering it.

What, then, is the “history of literature” that Croce himself proposes? The following passage of *Lettura di poeti* would explain the meaning of Croce’s definitive concept of a “history of literature”:

The artist uniquely converts his affections into forms of beauty, and these individual and living and inimitable forms are his work in historical reality. To discern them as beautiful and to locate them in their character is to give their history, and, in this respect, there is nothing more to be sought. (LP: 241)

The “history of literature” presented here is an extension of the concept presented in *La poesia*: Croce states that works of art cannot be incorporated

¹² *Storia letteraria per epoche e storia per saggi e monografie* (*Literary History of Each Period and History by Articles and Individual Studies*)

into general (diachronic) history insofar as they are extremely individualistic, while works of art with such characteristics are also part of history, and true history is that history which encompasses them. In *Lettura di poeti*, however, there can be found an even clearer observation:

But [De Sanctis] did not have an awareness of the problem for himself, which required a radical new idea of the history of poetry and literature [...] sometimes he falls into an explanation of “civil history”, that he unduly introduced, and gives primacy to it over the “poetic and literary history”. (LP: 239)

Here Croce criticizes De Sanctis for confusing the “history of poetry” with the “civic history” (= “cultural history”)¹³: It is in his last years that Croce starts to criticize openly De Sanctis, whom he has looked up to as his teacher. At the point where he finally breaks from De Sanctis, Croce’s views on the “history of literature” becomes clearer than ever before. In the following passage from *Lettura di poeti*, he states:

However, while I have claimed a history composed of essays or monographs as a complete and unique history of poetry and art, I have taken the care to give reason and justification to the need that leads to differently conformed books. Such books would present subjects according to cultural epochs and add extrinsic or practical biographies of the authors to the delineations of these epochs and briefings belonging to the history of philosophy and science, or would be useful and expedient in some other way. (LP: 241)

Based on a clear distinction, now Croce confirms the validity of both the “history of poetry” and the “cultural history” (“literature” belongs to this category). In this statement, the final form of Croce’s view on the “history of literature” is expressed.

¹³ Croce’s reproach is more trenchant toward the history of Italian literature by Tiraboschi and that of Giudici, while De Sanctis is still highly esteemed as the first modern critic who surpassed them.

8. Conclusions

This paper has traced Croce's career as a literary scholar, and revealed: 1) Croce's eventual rejection of De Sanctis's "history of literature", pointed out by Wellek, is achieved only in Croce's later years, and even that kind of "history of literature" is viewed affirmatively by the early Croce; 2) In the 1910s, as Croce's aesthetics and historical theories develop, the "history of literature" in the general sense comes to be rejected, and, at the same time, Croce starts to investigate the nature of the other and "true" history of literature; 3) Beginning in the 1930s, Croce starts to establish the distinction between the history specific to poetry (the history of individual and universal works and authors) and history of literature (the history of literary expression as a part of culture influenced by the times) and to affirm both of them.

What he has discovered is a new "history" depicted through works of art, reversing the conventional approach of analyzing literature from the perspective of general social history. In his later years, Croce himself embodies the "history of poetry" through his books on ancient and modern Western writers, and the "cultural history" through his works covering the whole history of Italian literature. Taking this opportunity, Croce finally criticizes De Sanctis's view on the history of literature, by proposing the distinction between two kinds of "history of literature" that he himself has presented.

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