

**Adventures of Form:  
Italian Aesthetics from Neo-Idealism to Pareyson**

*Introduction*

When Luigi Pareyson published his seminal *Estetica. Teoria della formatività* in 1954, Italian cultural life was still dominated by Benedetto Croce's aesthetics. Pareyson's work was seen as a "powerful alternative" (Bubbio 2009, 6), challenging both idealism and positivism by adopting a hermeneutic approach in the tradition of Heidegger. Several decades prior, however, a persuasive, albeit certainly not decisively successful, alternative to Crocean aesthetics was already offered, and from within the same neo-Hegelian tradition: in the philosophy of Giovanni Gentile.

Given the nature of Gentile's engagement in Italian politics, it is not surprising that his work has been shunned in Italy for a long time and virtually forgotten outside of Italy. Gentile is widely remembered as the "philosopher of fascism," providing Mussolini's regime with its most coherent *theoretical* defense and serving it loyally until he was murdered by a group of anti-fascist partisans in 1944, ironically after leaving a tribunal in Florence where he argued for the release of certain anti-fascist thinkers (Gregor). Croce, in contrast, was one of the most respected and outspoken critics of fascism. This political antagonism eventually led to the unraveling of what had been a long and fruitful friendship. The polemics exchanged between Croce and Gentile, however, proved to be intellectually fruitful in other respects, driving both to continuously sharpen their thinking, most considerably in the domain of aesthetics.

In this paper I will argue that Pareyson's articulation of art as *formativity* emerged out of an "adventure of form" whose turbulent trajectory was driven by the polemical dialogue of Croce and Gentile and its resultant innovations. More specifically, I will suggest that Pareyson's alternative to Crocean aesthetics is indebted in no small measure to two Gentilean notions: (1) form as *feeling*, and (2) art as the "self-translation" (*autotradursi*) of this feeling. Finally, I will demonstrate that — this indebtedness notwithstanding — Pareyson overcomes the significant deficiencies in Gentile's theory by dint of a powerful hermeneutic approach. Pareyson's elaboration of the nature of interpretation provides a means of addressing art that is respectful of the claims

of *otherness* and *difference* with regard to which Gentile simply fails in alarming ways.

### *Croce and Gentile*

It would be a highly daunting task for anyone to undertake a study of Gentile's philosophy without taking into account his relationship with Benedetto Croce, both philosophical and personal. The two men were close friends and, until their political convictions became irreparably polarized around 1924, worked together "in a shared battle for cultural and civic renewal in Italy" (Turi 914). It is clear that while Gentile and Croce had many friendly philosophical disagreements — airing largely in their shared neo-idealistic periodical, "La Critica" — their quarreling assumed a nasty, polemical aspect only as the result of a profound break in political ideology. Croce himself "observed that his 'intellectual disagreement' with Gentile, which had existed for 'many years,' had been joined by 'another of a practical and political nature; rather, the first [had] been converted into the second, and this [was] more severe'" (Turi 916). From this fundamental conflict of political identification grew a protracted and varied argument for which the field of aesthetics would become the most frenzied battleground.

One major reason it is so difficult to talk about Gentile without Croce, especially on the topics of art and aesthetics, is because Gentile's philosophy of art developed from within the firmly grounded Crocean aesthetic system. Both thinkers identify the essence of art to be *feeling*, but in markedly different ways: for Croce, art is the *expression* of feeling, while for Gentile it is pure feeling itself (De Ruggiero 493-95). In order to make sense of the critical upshot of this distinction, we must first come to terms with Croce's understanding of *intuition* and *expression*.

For Croce, *intuition* is a fundamentally distinct category of theoretical activity, functionally segregated from the *logical* and *historical* forms, although the latter is really just a sub-component of intuition (Croce 1992, 29-32). The aesthetic *form* is identified with the faculty of intuition and serves as the functional mechanism through which mere "impressions" are turned into "expressions." What exactly is being "expressed"?

In *The Aesthetic* (1909), Croce suggests that "feeling" (*sentimento*) — in one of its primary senses — is synonymous with "impression" (Croce 1992, 82). This particular sense is to be sharply distinguished from that of "feeling" as a variety of "economic activity," that is, of *wanting* and *desiring* (Croce 1992,

83). But, if an *impression* is understood as the result of external stimuli, how are we to identify it with the rather ambiguous notion of feeling? *Prima facie*, it seems that Croce is reducing feeling to mere sensation — the *qualia* produced by one's sensory interaction with the world. So, then, the aesthetic is to be found in the expression of one's sensory experience. As tenable as this might initially sound, it situates the role of art in a vague place indeed. If aesthetic form consists merely in the intuitive (immediate, non-conceptual) expression of sense impressions, and the essence of art is just such aesthetic expression, then *everyone* is an artist. While Croce does not entirely shy away from this strange claim, he does problematize it by juggling a rather controversial distinction:

It is customary to distinguish between the work of art which exists inside us and that which exists in the outside world; this way of speaking seems infelicitous to us, since the work of art (the aesthetic work) is always internal; and what is called the external work is no longer the work of art. (Croce 1992, 57).

In this view, everyone *is* an artist; those who produce what are normally called “artworks” are something different in addition to their pedestrian role as artists. Art is a purely internal activity, while the external, practical production of *works* of art is to be relegated to the *economic* or *practical* activity of the spirit.

Although still tacitly maintaining this distinction, Croce later gives a more robust role to *feeling* in the sphere of aesthetic experience. This development of a more complex and sophisticated treatment of art primarily arose, as Merle E. Brown suggests, out of the continuing debate between Gentile and Croce (Brown, ch. 4). While Gentile could not (until *La Filosofia dell'arte*) ascend beyond an abstract approach to art that discusses its “philosophical implications and dialectical elements” (Brown 1966, 122) at the expense of any attention to its simplicity and concrete sensuousness, Croce was hard pressed to see in art anything more than the mundane internal processing of sensory data. The often-vitriolic dialogue between Croce and Gentile, then, allowed each to become more like the other; it produced dialectically two effective syntheses of the thinkers' respective positions, transcending their shortcomings and giving expression to their strengths.

This more robust treatment of feeling first emerged in Croce's 1913 *Breviario di estetica* (Graham 120). The most succinct

pronouncement of Croce's updated position, as Graham also observes (120), is as follows:

What lends coherence and unity to intuition is intense feeling. Intuition is truly such because it expresses an intense feeling, and can arise only when the latter is its source and basis. Not idea but intense feeling is what confers upon art the ethereal lightness of the symbol. Art is precisely a yearning kept within the bounds of a representation.

(Croce 1965, 25).

Hence art, as a discrete category of the spirit, is to be regarded as *form* (the essence of which is feeling) in which any sort of *content* (particular impressions) is given expression. Gentile accepts this as accurate, as far as it goes. It is when Croce takes up the task of dissecting works of art to identify which "parts" of them should be rejected as non-art (Croce 1965, 27) that Gentile begins stomping his feet. For Croce, art is feeling expressed intuitively. The artist creates a "symbol," which serves as a pre-logical representation of the feeling found in expression. This characterization suggests two important points: (1) that art must be distinguished from conscious, logical thought, and (2) that the feeling expressed existed at some point objectively free from the subjective activity of the intuition. Gentile strongly takes issue with both claims, as I shall illustrate below.

For Gentile, feeling and thought cannot be separated. If *pensiero pensante* – "thought thinking," i.e., "concrete thinking"<sup>1</sup> – is reality, and art (feeling) is the immediate subjective form of its dialectical development, then it follows that artistic expression can only exist as immanent to the ceaseless becoming of the real. What exactly, then, is the role of feeling in relation to thinking? A large part of Croce's failure to grasp what constitutes here an original and innovative idea is the confusion arising from Gentile's dialectic: is it a real three-term dialectic, or a two-term "pseudo-dialectic"? If the thesis of the dialectic is *subject*, and the antithesis *object*, then what is the synthesis? According to Croce, it amounts to nothing more than a restatement of the thesis. And if the thesis is

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<sup>1</sup> For Gentile, *pensiero pensante* is the ceaseless concrete process or flow of thinking of which *pensiero pensato* ("thought thought", i.e., "abstract thought") — an individual "thought" — is a halted product. Inasmuch as *pensiero pensante* is a dynamic process, it can never be grasped or pinned down for analysis. It is the unified, living principle of reality, which is, however, broken up in the abstract multiplicity of *thoughts*. This dialectical interplay constitutes the unfolding of reality (Gentile 1922, 41-43).

different from the synthesis, then at the very least it is the thesis and the antithesis that cannot be distinguished. Brown presents the problem as follows:

Now it might be said that if the mediating subject, that which is ultimately concrete and real, recognizes the immediate subject as positing its own opposite but identical thought, then, this dialectic collapses into a pseudo-dialectic of two terms only, of the mediating subject and that which posits or knows. Both the immediate subject and the object, that is, would be thought of as the opposite of the mediating subject [...] Conceived in such a way, they are no more clearly different than are Hegel's Being and Not-Being.

(Brown 1966, 83)

This difficulty is overcome in *La Filosofia dell'arte*, where Gentile successfully establishes *feeling* (the essence of art) as the immediate subject, defined not as thought, but as "the condition of transcendental thought itself" (Gentile 1972, 147). This *feeling*, so defined, is what Kant called the "original unity of apperception," it is "the living principle of the life of the spirit" (Gentile 1972, 146). *Feeling*, for Gentile, is the fundamental *I* — that which comes to know itself only as it posits itself as an object of thinking. The immediate subject (feeling) is not self-conscious; it can achieve such only through the mediation of thinking.

From this definition of "feeling" Gentile comes to reject Croce's formulation of "art as expression of feeling." This relates to the two points mentioned above: that art is to be distinguished from conscious, logical thought, and that the feeling expressed existed at some point objectively free from the subjective activity of the intuition. About the latter, Gentile states, "first there is feeling and then the intuition of this feeling; as if such an immediate intuition or any spiritual activity directed upon an object already existent were possible!" (Gentile 1972, 156). The primary error, for Gentile, of Croce's "expressivism" is that it takes what is nominally an aesthetics of *form* and turns it into an aesthetics of *content*. Because Croce "gave to feeling an existence of its own, independent of its function as the content of art" (Gentile 1972, 155), it cannot possibly function as the essence of the *form* of art. This "independent existence" is the "practical activity" of the spirit mentioned above.

About the former of the two difficulties, Gentile writes:

[Croce's aesthetics] began with distinguishing the theoretical activity of art from the theoretical activity of philosophy on the basis of their special content — the particular in the case of art, the universal in the case of philosophy. It ends with differentiating the intuitive form of knowledge, supposed to be peculiar to art, by allotting it a special content, namely, feeling, from which the *lyrical character* of art could be derived. But such a difference of content cannot be resolved into a difference of form.

(Gentile 1972, 155)

In other words, Croce's aesthetics cannot be one of *form* if the form of artistic activity can be distinguished only by the particular *content* with which it is capable of dealing. It is a result of this odd position, for example, that Croce dissects the work of Leopardi, suggesting that he is poetic only when engaged in the "pure" expression of genuine feeling, relegating the pieces *La Ginestra*, *Canto notturno*, and *A se stesso* to "didacticism," "oratory," and "a notation of feelings and resolutions which do not go beyond the circle of the individual," respectively (Croce 1955, 112). Thus, not the metaphysical poetry of T. S. Eliot, or the philosophical novels of Dostoevsky and Thomas Mann, or the politically driven folk-rock music of Bob Dylan could be regarded, in accordance with Croce's theory, as "works of art" *in toto*.

Gentile wants to resolve this error by identifying form and content. The artistic form, for Gentile, is feeling, and whatever content one is inspired to shape "disappears in the artistic form" (1972, 158) and is brought to concrete realization through the dialectical mediation of the artwork. Simply put, when a poet sits down to work, she does not begin by discriminately searching her thoughts for sufficiently "poetic" material to which to give "aesthetic" expression.<sup>2</sup> She does not have to find as her "content" some burning, subterranean "intense feeling," but is, rather, inclined towards her preferred material — whatever it may be — *by* the feeling (which needs not, by the way, be particularly intense), which gives unity, infinity, and coherence to the emerging work.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> My usage of "she" as a generic pronoun is a method of ensuring gender neutrality. I find that alternating between "he" and "she" in the text is more elegant than writing "he or she" every time a generic pronoun is in order.

<sup>3</sup> The reader may here be reminded of R. G. Collingwood's aesthetics. It has been argued that Collingwood was highly indebted to Gentile and Croce but failed to acknowledge the influence of either in any of his books. In his introduction to Gentile's *Genesis and*

How does this dialectic of the work of art *work*? To answer this question we first must be clear that for Gentile there are really two matters at play here: there is *art* and there is *artwork*. The former is an abstraction. *Art*, conceived apart from any concrete work, is simply the abstract, immediate subjective form (the *I* in its thetical immediacy) of the spirit discussed earlier. The dialectical becoming of an *artwork*, on the other hand, is “the creation of a new reality because it is the creation of a personality and of the world that belongs to this personality, neither of which could come to exist without the act of thought” (Gentile 1972, 169). Just as Gentile’s true tripartite dialectic can be called both the “unification of a multiplicity” and the “multiplication of a unity,” the work of art consists in the simultaneous processes of resolving the multiplicity of thoughts into the unity of feeling, and the division of the unity of feeling into the multiplicity of thoughts.

Because feeling is treated dialectically in Gentile’s system, for him it could not possibly serve as the circumscribed “content” of an artwork, that is, as something already complete in itself (and thus, in a sense, already “expressed”). Further, because feeling is an indeterminate and continuous process, it is not conceivable that it can “find its full expression in” any given work (Gentile 1972, 139). It is a *formative* development — albeit unfolding only within the act of thinking — which Pareyson will come to recast in terms of an outwardly engaged production. Indeed, this rejection of the possibility of a formally complete *expression* leads to a major criticism of expressivism in general:

Consider the poet who sings his sorrow: as we know, while he sings, his sorrow is appeased and it vanishes [reference to the preface of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800]. When we read the poem we cannot say that we know the poet’s sorrow, which was to have been communicated to us; instead we find ourselves in that state of grace which is the result of poetry — tranquility and joy rather than suffering. All feelings, when we speak of them, wither and fade away. Real suffering not only is unable to find words [...] but every joy that man wishes to preserve is jealously shut in his heart for fear that the envy of others may embitter it or the very air contaminate it.

(Gentile 1972, 139).

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*Structure of Society*, H. S. Harris suggests that this “deliberate concealment” may be the source of Collingwood’s falling out of vogue in British academia (15).

Just because the poet is expressing sorrow, it does not follow that we as the reader or audience “experience” sorrow, at least not in the same way. As Gordon Graham puts it, “Jealousy and romantic love are familiar emotions expressed in literature, but I can read a poem expressing all-consuming jealousy in the first person [...] without becoming to the faintest degree jealous myself, just as I can read a love poem without falling in love myself” (Graham 2001, 123).

Gentile might suggest that the underlying and formative *feeling* of jealousy supposedly driving the composition of the piece finds the realization of such conceptually. The poet begins with this singular unmediated feeling, and, through thought after thought, steadily assembles line after line, stanza after stanza. The unity of the feeling is thus broken up into numerous objectifications of its *ipso facto* ineffable resonance. Engaging the piece attentively, the reader squares with this multiplicity and, in the dynamic mediation of her thinking, affords it the necessary unity characteristic of any successful work of art. While the reader here does not herself feel “sorrow,” “jealousy” or “love,” what she does feel is the *universal* resonance of the essential feeling of the subject — the “soul,” the “humanity.”

The essence of art, for Gentile is feeling. However, “feeling” considered as pure, immediate expression is abstract. The moment the artist asserts her feeling, it is broken up into multiplicity. This multiplicity is the objective process without which unity is impossible. The experience of an artwork by both artist and spectator consists precisely in the simultaneous breaking up of the work through thought, and unification of the work through feeling; these two aspects are inextricable. The artist translates herself objectively by becoming ever more self-conscious of her feeling through the rigorous development of thinking. In this development is subsumed every prerequisite for the creation of a work: language, theory, technique, equipment, political persuasion, moral sensibility, philosophical curiosity, etc.; in short, all of the elements rejected by Croce as *non-artistic*. The spectator of the work, in turn, translates it into his own feeling, assimilating the subjective reality of the artist into his own subjectivity by a similar process of working through the objective stage (multiplicity) into which the work’s feeling is divided.

This *self-translation* is the very constitution of the world of the artwork. It does not rest as a static and already complete *thing* with which thinking beings have the liberty of coming into and going out of contact. For the work to live, it must be ceaselessly created

and recreated. The act of creation occurs every time a work is dynamically engaged, galvanized in thought, and translated into the living reality of the individual viewer, who at this moment renders the work universal. The “spectator,” then, is never merely spectator, and the *other* is never truly *other*. We must anticipate here that Gentile’s principle of *autotradursi*, while in important respects proto-hermeneutic, fails to sustain the gestures of difference, which is crucial, not only to the nature of art, but to the social *as such*, of which any aesthetic engagement is essentially a part. Pareyson’s implicit critique of Gentile is on this score and will be the theme of the following section.

### *Gentile and Pareyson*

By now we have established the primacy of *feeling* in Gentile’s conception of art. As such, however, this notion of feeling plays an indispensable role in his philosophy as a whole: “Feeling itself then must be an intrinsic part of consciousness; it must be consciousness itself, in the experience of which we realize our own being” (Gentile 1972, 138). Art (as feeling), then, “opens up in its own way the Being of beings” (Heidegger 2001, 38), to quote Heidegger. As a fundamental principle, feeling pervades every effort of the spirit, driving the philosopher to realize her metaphysical doctrine and the scientist to reveal the truths of nature through empirical research just as it provides the immediate form by which the composer writes her symphony. “Feeling is the only door of the spirit” (Gentile 1972, 178). As Antimo Negri observes, “the concreteness of thought, the historicity of philosophy, and the phenomenological mood of logic all derive from feeling, that is, from art” (Negri 1994, 149).

But how, exactly, does thought play into the work of art? The most significant way thought operates on the level of artistic creation, in Gentile’s theory, is through criticism. For Gentile, criticism is not some secondary, *a posteriori* reaction to aesthetic work, but an integral part of its creation and sustenance: “The work of art finds its actual existence only in criticism, just as the object finds its abode in the thought that thinks it” (Gentile 1972: 222). This organic notion of criticism is the foundation for what Brown regards as “the most radical idea of *La Filosofia dell’arte*” (Brown 1966, 154), the aforementioned art as self-translation (*autotradursi*). Also, as we shall see, the *formal* adventure of self-translation plays a significant role in the shaping of Pareyson’s own rejection of Crocean aesthetics. Despite this Gentilean inheritance, Pareyson embarks on a *formative* adventure of

hermeneutic aesthetic production that frees him from the Hegelian idealist trappings in which Croce and Gentile remain mired.

Through his concept of *autotradursi*, Gentile finally overcomes actualism's tendency to collapse into the two-term "pseudo-dialectic." The major principle supplying the strength for this success is the now clearly defined nature of the immediate subject (thesis) as feeling. In positing unmediated and un-self-conscious *feeling* as the first logical term in the dialectic, Gentile effectively provides more than merely nominal work for the synthetic moment to accomplish, namely, the achievement of self-consciousness.

The fact that Gentile employs the term "feeling" (*sentimento*) rather than "sensation" (*sensazione*) is important. While "sensation" can be described in terms of the objective (some externally given datum) as well as the synthetic (sensing some externally given datum), it fails at the job of invoking immediate subjectivity (Brown 1966, 158). The word "feeling," on the other hand, can be used to describe each moment of the dialectic. As examples, consider "a *feeling* of dread" (immediate subjectivity/*thesis*), "when he touched the bottle, he *felt* cold condensation" (objectivity/*antithesis*), and "I could *feel* her heartbeat as I laid my head on her chest" (mediate subjectivity/*synthesis*). With the word "feeling," then, and by rejecting Croce's early reduction of feeling to sensation, Gentile can define the abstract thesis of the dialectic as "the non-actual essence of art" (Brown 1966, 159) and at the same time use it to describe the essential form that is mediated and therefore actualized through the total dialectical expression of the artwork. This dialectical realization of the concrete work of art is carried out through the process of "self-translation." For the remainder of this section I will attempt to describe as clearly as possible how this process unfolds.

We begin with the immediate subject, *feeling*. Gentile views pure, unmediated feeling as essentially *pleasure* — it is Rousseau's "sentiment of existence," Spinoza's *objectum mentis*. Pleasure is consciousness, but not self-consciousness: "[...] the life with which pleasure is to be identified is not the physiological life as understood by science, but the life which unfolds on the stage of consciousness and is consciousness itself" (Gentile 1972, 145). This pleasure is a complete, unfettered unity, but being an *immediate* unity, it is abstract. What is missing? Pain.

Pleasure and pain are two absolute contradictories, but, as Gentile tells us, they "are in a certain sense, not really two"

(Gentile 1972, 142). This “certain sense” has to do with the dichotomous or “contrary” relationship of pleasure and pain:

The relation between two contraries is dialectical, not only in an abstract logical sense, but in a metaphysical, that is, a real and concrete sense. Their duality is the opposition of a unity in itself, of something unique which lives, develops, comes to be, and is so far as it is not, and conversely. It posits itself as an identity of opposites. A pleasure which is stable, changeless, constant, is a dead pleasure [...]. Its very life consists in continually arising out of its contrary.

(Gentile 1972, 142)

Thus, *pain* can be regarded as *not-pleasure*, just as *pleasure* can be called *not-pain*, but when they are not in opposition to one another, they “are both abstract” (Gentile 1972, 143). The moment the poet, impelled by an indomitable *feeling*, embarks upon the adventure of crafting a piece, a work of art, the pleasure of the immediate unity of this feeling is shattered into multiplicity. The moment she asserts, “I have this feeling,” the unity is broken into duality; there is the *feeling* and there is the *I*, as now distinguished from the feeling. This is the world of the poem — the *objective* stage in the dialectic.

In contrast to Croce’s view, the object of this artistic “assertion” needs not be of an exclusively *sensuous* nature. Gentile’s aesthetics allows for the treatment — at the objective stage — of any given feeling, sensation or concept, no matter how cold, rigid or abstract. What distinguishes a work of art from a philosophical treatise, for example, is not the *content* (found in the objective articulation), but the degree to which the subjectivity, the *feeling* (as a *formal* principle), is dominant throughout the dialectical process. On the other side, a philosopher should not be prevented from indulging in the occasional poetic flourish or conceit, insofar as the subjective tone does not drown the objective and synthetic articulation of his argument. Thus, severely didactic poems, such as Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, are often more readily accepted as philosophy than as poetry, while many of Plato’s dialogues, for example, are frequently praised for their poetic qualities over and beyond the strictly philosophical concepts being communicated. As Angelo De Gennaro remarks about Gentile’s theory, “the essence of poetry is not the complex of ideas and thoughts of the poet, but the mode in which these ideas and thoughts are represented (167).

Logically following the objective stage in the dialectic is the synthesis, the mediation, in short, the achievement of self-consciousness. For Gentile, “every genuine poem is a synthesis of feeling, objective articulation, and overarching awareness” (Brown 1970, 11). This is where criticism, as organic to the artistic process, comes into play. The working poet first *feels*, then *asserts* the feeling, then, finally, *observes* herself asserting the feeling. With every line she strives to express that nameless, consuming feeling entirely — to *translate* it through technique and language, to make it stand outside of her as an objective entity. But upon the completion of each line, she realizes that she has not succeeded. With the addition of every new line and every new stanza the preceding lines and stanzas are altered. They assume a new character in relation to the ever-growing structure in which they have life. Gentile writes:

Translation, if we want to be precise, is not something supervening after all is over, when the expression has been completed, when the poet has recited his song and is silent and dead, and his song has been passed to others; but it is something born in the original act of expression itself and it develops step by step as the poet proceeds in the development of his theme by a progressive treatment of his fundamental motive.

(Gentile 1972, 218).

This “self-translation” is the original creative act of which all other intra or inter-linguistic acts of translation are but further developments. The objective, narrative reality of the work of art unfolds as the progressive and constructive division of the artist’s unified immediate feeling. The synthetic moment of self-consciousness (the concrete realization of the artistic process) can only occur when the artist casts the aesthetic judgment of criticism on the multiplicity before her, thereby unifying it once more in what becomes the logical synthesis of the poem’s many elements for the expression of a singular mood. It is for this reason that Gentile writes, “the author who creates a beautiful work of art and the man who succeeds in appreciating its beauty both participate in the same act, which implies the identity of genius and taste” (1972, 215). Just as the critic must possess enough of the creative genius of the artist to even enter the world of the work, the artist must share with the critic a sufficiently keen aesthetic eye to be able to resolutely proclaim, “Behold, it is good.”

It is imperative to keep in mind that, for Gentile, the work *is* only insofar as it *works*. In other words, the artwork, properly understood, is *ipso facto* not a thing. Hence, the originary act of *translation* undergone in the work's composition is actuated and creatively retraced each time it is taken up in the aesthetic experience of a reader/spectator. Critic and genius inhabit the same formal space — whether production or “consumption” — and by virtue of their indissoluble intercourse constitute the opening through which the life of a work is to be grasped, sustained, and resuscitated. Every resuscitation, recomposition, or, in short, *self-translation*, of a work in the act of a subject's aesthetic enjoyment achieves its effective performance *outside of time*, or, better, in an *eternal present*. This “eternal present” is precisely the *form* of the subject's feeling. Feeling is the spaceless place in which the spectator's *critic* subsumes the artist's *genius* into itself. If Montale's *Personae separatae*, for example, is to truly live in my reading, the abstract immediacy of the poet's feeling must be mediated into *my* feeling. I feel the uncanny transformation of daybreak into night (Montale 289) and, in an ironic twist, find the hitherto “lost sense” in which I am Montale and Montale is I. The poem translates itself into my own feeling, seamlessly bridging a span of several decades in a heroic apoplexy wherein all difference, all resistant otherness is spectralized, becoming at most an impotent, though nominally challenging, figment of my own relentless *thinking*. In the form of feeling, reader and author are identified.<sup>4</sup>

But the work does not translate itself. As the reader, *I* translate it in the “objective” mediation of my own thinking, whose multiplicity is ultimately resolved into the unity of feeling. The work forms my personality and vice versa only as I retrace its multifarious threads to the impersonal, transcendental font in which all “empirically distinct” individuals are dissolved. My abstract *immediate* subjectivity becomes “concretely” *mediate* in its identification with the object (in this case, the poem, conceived of not as a thing, but as the poet's own feeling objectively articulated). Although the unity of the poem (as the logically unfolded subjectivity of the poet) is preserved, such is possible only insofar as it is tirelessly recomposed, retranslated, in the transcendental functioning of the *interior homo* intrinsic to, and, in

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<sup>4</sup> To “spectralize” means, literally, to turn something into a specter, a ghost. “Spectralizing” otherness, then, means to deny the other or the different any substantiality.

part, constitutive of, my own thinking (Gentile 1960, 98-108). While grabbing Gentile's organicist baton against Croce's — in Gentile's view only nominally organic — fragmented formalism, also Pareyson, as we shall see, wants to repudiate the solipsistic subjectivism of the Gentilean aesthetic system.

Pareyson overtly challenges the subjectivist fundament of the Crocean system (expression) to which Gentile's innovations (feeling *per se*, *autotradursi*) are indebted by advocating a crucial terminological and conceptual substitution: the replacement of "subject" with "person." In *Estetica* [1954] he writes: "The best guarantee against the danger of subjectivism is offered by the concept of person, on the basis of which, while affirming that every thing with which the person enters into relation must become interior to her, at the same time affirms its irreducible independence" (Pareyson 1960, 194). Thus, while *otherness* as such is overcome in the synthetic regenerativity of Gentile's "mediate subject," it is incorporated as essential to Pareyson's concept of *person*. This point will be important for our discussion of conversation below. Before proceeding, however, a broad sketch of Pareyson's aesthetics of *formativity* is in order.

When Pareyson published *Estetica. Teoria della formatività* in 1954, Italian academic culture was still largely under the sway, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, of Croce's aesthetics (Bubbio 6). Clearly, Gentile's infamous role as the "philosopher of fascism" did not help to make his contributions in the philosophy of art, however innovative they may have been, palatable to an academic world still recovering from the suffering and destruction engendered by Mussolini's regime. Despite being unfashionable, however, Gentile's aesthetics exercised a not insignificant influence on Pareyson's own thinking, most considerably in its repudiation of certain problematic elements in Croce's system.<sup>5</sup> In what follows I will indicate parallels in Gentile's and Pareyson's thinking about form and then demonstrate how Pareyson's aesthetics surpasses Gentile's in its rejection of the latter's arguably fascistic pitfalls. Such advances, I will argue, are made possible by Pareyson's hermeneutic approach to the problem of form.

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<sup>5</sup> Gentile himself was quite impressed with the depth of Pareyson's thought. Pareyson's first published paper, "Note sulla filosofia dell'esistenza," was printed, while he was still a student, in *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 6 (1938), 407-38, of which Gentile was the director.

Croce's aim in writing *The Aesthetic* was to present "a general theory of philosophy and a general solution to all its problems" (Lyas xix). Thus, the work is concerned with the nature and "spiritual function" of art only insofar as it plays a role in the overarching metaphysical and epistemological structure of the philosopher's system. Similarly, as we have seen, Gentile's treatment of art is grounded in the neo-Hegelian framework of his "actual idealism," within which it supplies the *thetical* moment of the tripartite dialectic, articulated as a metaphysical process. Pareyson's work, in contrast, explicitly rejects such presuppositional system building:

The philosopher who pretends to legislate in the field of art, or who artificially deduces an aesthetics from a pre-established philosophical system, or who in every case proceeds without regard to aesthetic experience, renders himself incapable of explaining the latter; his reflections cease to be philosophy and are reduced to mere wordplay.

(Pareyson 1966, 9)

For Pareyson, if one is to truly understand art, one must appraise it on its own terms, as it presents itself in actual experience.<sup>6</sup>

Art presents itself, in Pareyson's view, primarily as *form*, thought in terms of "a structured object, uniting thought, feeling, and matter in an activity that aims at the harmonious coordination of all three and proceeds according to the laws postulated and manifested by the work itself as it is being made" (Eco 159).<sup>7</sup> "Form," then, is an activity that realizes itself in production (ποίησις). Such a *poietic* rendering of the nature of form makes it impossible to distinguish it from any kind of *content*. The Crocean model of form as the *internal* "expression" of a subject's feeling is here rejected in favor of a concrete *formativity* that operates in the intercourse of real objects in the external environment. As Eco observes, "The Crocean illusion of an interior figuration, whose

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<sup>6</sup> One might object that in the passage quoted above Pareyson is at the very least *presupposing* the existence of something called "aesthetic experience." This worry is easily dispelled, however, if "aesthetic experience" is understood simply as the experience one undergoes when engaging a work of art. Understood thusly, one need not assume a total homogeneity with respect to such experiences; the character of "aesthetic experience" would vary in accord with the variation of individual artworks, perhaps defined as such in virtue of their inclusion in an "art world," as defined by Arthur Danto.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Umberto Eco wrote his doctoral dissertation under Pareyson's supervision.

physical exteriorization is only a corollary event, deliberately ignored one of the richest and most fruitful areas of creativity” (1989, 160).

In the act of production, the artist takes her “cues” from *matter* in the physical world, presented as “a set of autonomous laws” which she “must be able to interpret and turn into artistic laws” (Eco 1989, 161). The development of the work proceeds in accordance with this ongoing “interpretation,” wherein the resistant materiality of the selected objects makes certain demands on the artist with respect to how it wants to be treated. This productive interpretation, while relying upon the sensuous *voice* of the matter for its direction, also requires the responsive *ear* of the artist, which is necessarily oriented from a particular point of view. Every artistic working on a given array of matter, then, results in the empirical articulation of the artist’s personality in the form of choices, traces, retraces, decisions, and reconsiderations.

Whatever the particular theme or character of a work may be, the latter’s “content,” broadly construed, consists in the sensuous constitution of a personality. The direction or trajectory of this constitution — the “natural intentionality” (Eco 1989, 162) of the work — is delineated in the suggestive germs from which the formative act draws its impetus: the first line of a poem, a cursory brushstroke, the shadow cast by a tree on a midsummer afternoon. These “germs” or “cues” give a multitude of *senses* or directions that the artist must choose from and develop. The natural intentionality of which the artist’s intentionality is a part — insofar as the artist herself is part of nature — makes up what Pareyson calls the “forming form” (*forma formante*). The “forming form” of a work serves as the teleological guide of its own empirical realization; it is the dynamic, processive principle governing the formative development of a work from its germinal initiation (Pareyson 1960, 59). Once the work is shaped into a sufficiently autonomous, harmonious whole, it presents itself as a finished model, a “formed form” (*forma formata*), in short, the completed artwork. This “formed form” is to be aesthetically evaluated in terms of how closely it *approximates* the ongoing “forming form” to which it owes its life: “[...] the work of art draws its value from being in line, not with something other, but with itself; the process of its formation consists in the completion of the forming form in a formed form” (Pareyson 1960, 61).

Like the *pensiero pensante* (for which see n1) of Gentile’s actualist system, *forma formante* is an active process that can only be appraised by recourse to its “completed” product. While

Pareyson does not use the Hegelian jargon, there is clearly a *dialectical* interplay between “forming form” and “formed form.” This interplay is most apparent from the *interpretive* perspective of the spectator/consumer, although it is equally important for the original productive act. In the case of the latter, most interesting for our purposes is the parallel to Gentile’s notion of *criticism* as creatively constitutive. Following the germinal threads suggested in the unfolding of a work’s “forming form,” the artist arrives at a “formed form” only by dint of a responsive, critical eye capable of discerning when the work is “autonomous and harmonious in all its parts” (Eco 62). Such a critical faculty is also responsible for determining how closely the “formed form” approximates the suggestions of the “forming form,” that is, for assessing its success or failure. The success or failure of a given work of art, of a “formed form,” is only intelligible when considered in terms of the work’s formative/normative conditions, e.g., the “forming form.” The “forming form,” however, is accessible only in the sensuous gestures and traces ossified in the “formed form.” This dialectical interplay is the basis of Pareyson’s theory of interpretation.

Unlike Gentile’s *pensiero pensante*, “forming form” is always already “out there” in the world, emerging in some measure from an environment of objects and actions independent of the artist’s own thinking. In the interpretation of a “formed form,” a finished work, one similarly engages with an “otherness,” but in this case presented in the sensualized personality of the artist (again, in the form of choices, reconsiderations, etc.). One interprets precisely by “reading” the “formed form” in a critical retracing, a reactivation of the “forming form” process through whose originary direction the artist brought the work to completion. The artist gives herself as “content” in the form of her production. That is, every work carries with it the trace of a peculiar style, or, in Gentile’s language, “feeling,” broken up and developed through a multiplicitous, objective articulation. As discussed above, Gentile’s principle of *autotradursi* demands that the immediacy of this subjective “feeling” be *translated* through a mediate subjectivity (concrete thinking), where reader and poet, spectator and artist, are dissolved in the *interiore homine* of the “transcendental ego.” As we shall see, Pareyson’s hermeneutic approach rejects this neo-Hegelian sublation of difference.

Two seemingly contradictory elements are necessary for an interpretation to successfully sustain the formativity of a work: freedom and faithfulness. Pareyson writes, “[...] the execution of an interpretation is always carried out by a single interpreter who

wishes to render the work as it itself desires” (Pareyson 1960, 195). Freely adopting one point of view, one avenue of approach from among many, the interpreter addresses a “revelatory aspect” of the work in a manner appropriate to its mode of disclosure. In this way, Pareyson avoids the pitfalls of an extreme relativism on the one hand (*any* interpretation is the “right” interpretation), and an extreme dogmatism on the other (*only one* interpretation is the “right” interpretation). Every instance of proper interpretation is simultaneously one *personal* execution, *and* the work itself in its immutable otherness (Pareyson 1960, 195). Contrary to Gentile, the “subject” does not appropriate the work into an illusory “transcendental” mediation. Instead, the work *appropriates the person*, places a claim on her, demands to be attended to and respected in accordance with its irreducible difference. Thus, we are presented with a provocative sense in which *interpretation* is a lot like *conversation*.

In everyday conversation, one does not have to *translate* the other’s language into “one’s own.” That is, to invoke more overtly the specter of Lévinas, I am not compelled — in the interest of genuine *understanding* — to assimilate “the other” into “the same.” Nor do I have to “represent” my interlocutor’s thoughts through some kind of impenetrable internal mechanism of “symbol” processing, however “transparent” it may be. Rather, I am “presented” with the other’s thoughts precisely in a mode seamlessly presentative of their irreducible otherness as such. This does not mean that I am incapable of understanding my interlocutor; on the contrary, it means that I am capable of understanding her *qua* other, that is, as *not me* and not appropriable by me.

Similarly, for Pareyson, the execution of an interpretation does aim to *translate* the work of art as though it were an innocuous, impoverished shell waiting to be filled with meaning, or, at the very least, an unfinished project requiring an interpreter to complete it in accordance with a *relative* point of view (Pareyson 1960, 201). The interpretive engagement must aim only to make the work live its own life. One’s *appropriation* by the work — or, by the other — is not some alien operation to which one passively falls prey. It is instead an openness to revelation, an attentiveness to the self-disclosive potentiality of form that transcends the simple active/passive dichotomy. According to Gentile’s theory of *autotradursi*, “the work does not exist in its determinateness and independence, but dissolves in an always new creative act, in which it is no longer possible to distinguish it from the interpretive

execution itself” (Pareyson 1960, 205). Understood in this way, every act of interpretation becomes a radical whitewashing of that with which one is presented, a fascistic implosion of difference into identity.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I have traced the development of twentieth-century Italian aesthetics, albeit cursorily, from the neo-Hegelian idealisms of Croce and Gentile to the sophisticated hermeneutics of Luigi Pareyson. This historical *adventure of form* is not unlike the adventurous — because fraught with the perilous possibility of failure — formativity elucidated in Pareyson’s theory. The “formed form” of each thinker’s view precariously demands to be opened up according to the trajectory of its germinal cues. The adventure of form is a conversation in which the possibilities of failure and growth are always attendant. Like conversation, interpretation means risk: the risk of misunderstanding, confusion, alienation.

The frequently vitriolic “dialogue” between Croce and Gentile, rife, to be sure, with misunderstanding, nevertheless helped to shape the path along which form became formativity and expression became production. If I have focused too much on Gentile at the expense of Croce, it is because, to my mind, the former represents at the same time what is most fruitful and what is most dangerous about neo-idealistic aesthetics. Moreover, Gentile’s principle of *autotradursi* provides a sort of proto-hermeneutical device — its insidious flaws notwithstanding — to which Pareyson’s contributions are arguably indebted.

Form, for Gentile, is feeling, but thought in terms of a placeless, timeless Rosetta Stone by whose dialectical adventure from “abstract” immediacy to “concrete,” mediate subjectivity everything is rendered uniformly intelligible. For Pareyson, on the other hand, form must be conceived of as *formativity* — the poietic activity in which objective materials are given shape, sense, and direction in accordance with a natural intentionality. The final product, the “formed form,” determined by the conclusive realization of one certain formative trajectory — chosen from among many others — must be interpreted if it is to *work* at all. To be effectively interpreted, however, the work must be respected in its irreducible otherness, its presentative inexhaustibility. To interpret a work of art is not to “represent” it, but to open oneself to its demands of presentation. Art is formative just as life is also

formative; it is *open*, revealing its intrinsic productive processes to anyone who is attentive.

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