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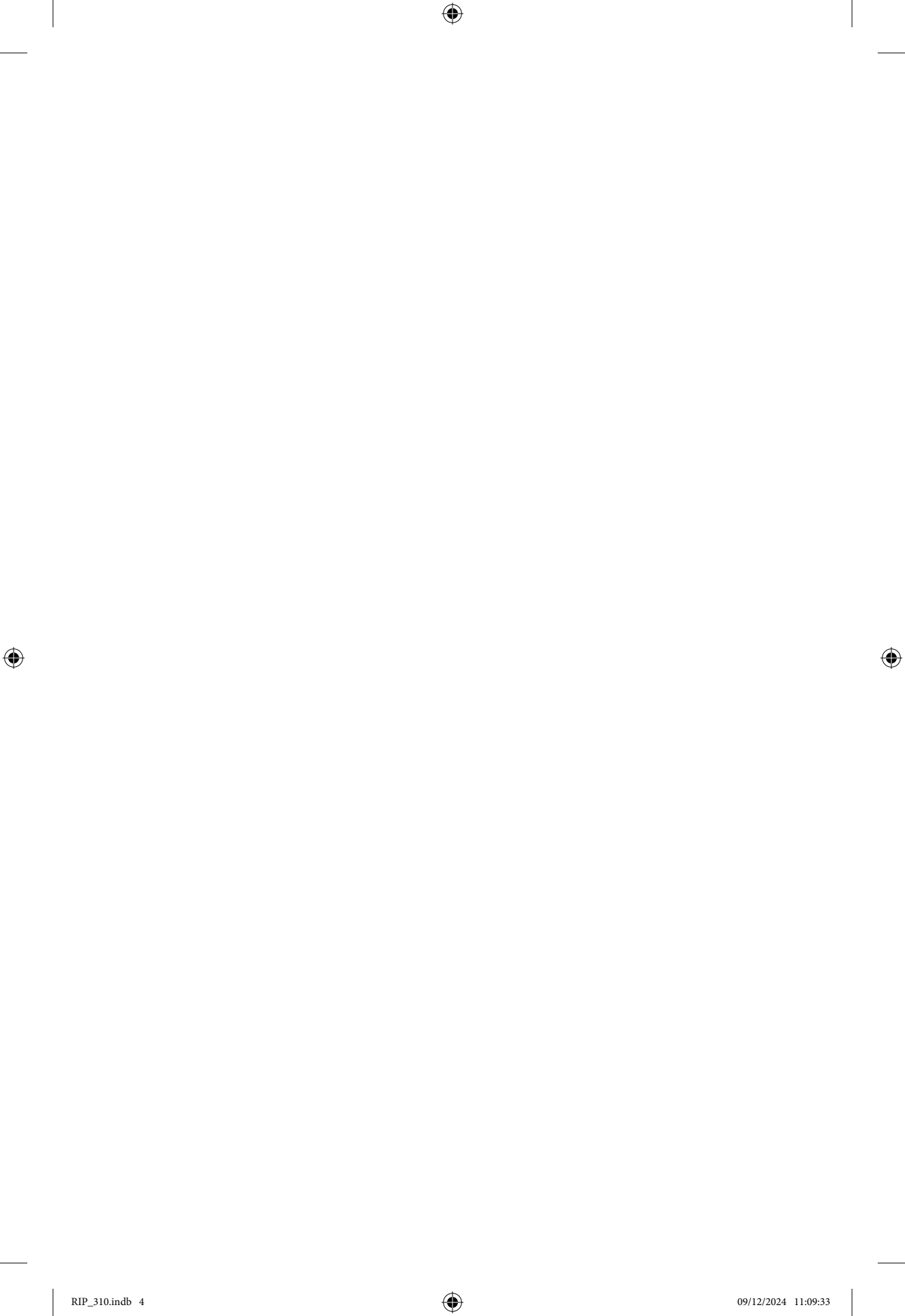
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What is Aesthetic Progress?

Outlines of Philosophy of History in Croce's Aesthetics

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The theme of progress runs through Croce's reflection for almost fifty years. Aesthetics represents the first important theoretical site in which this reflection appears, although still confusedly, perhaps not yet clearly defined in its contours and implications¹.

Reasoning about progress in the *Aesthetic* more than one hundred and twenty years after its first edition seems to be a problematic choice for more than one reason. First, because, in the first work of the *Philosophy of Spirit*, reflection remains at a provisional level. Progress has not yet been resolved into the category of unfolding (*svolgimento*), as will happen a few years later in the *Logica come scienza del concetto puro* (Logic as the Science of Pure Concept) and the *Filosofia della pratica. Economica ed etica* (Philosophy of Practice, Economics and Ethics)²; nor is it the clear distinction that stands out in the title of a 1947 essay, collected in *Filosofia e storiografia* (Philosophy and Historiography), where the sharp distinction between two understandings of progress is set forth: the "state of mind" that has animated modern mythologies and their desecrations, and the "philosophical concept" toward which Croce directs his attention³.

A general issue is added to this problematic matter, relating to the stage of Croce's reflection. Progress is one of Vico's "scraps" of modernity archived

1. Cf. Renata Viti Cavaliere, "Progresso," in *Lessico crociano. Un breviario filosofico-politico per il futuro*, ed. Rosalia Peluso (Naples: La scuola di Pitagora editrice, 2016), 549-60.
2. Benedetto Croce, "La storia della filosofia e il progresso filosofico," in *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, ed. Cristina Farnetti, with a Note by Gennaro Sasso (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1996), 332-35; Benedetto Croce, "Lo svolgimento e il progresso," in *Filosofia della pratica. Economica ed etica*, ed. Maurizio Tarantino, with a Note by Gennaro Sasso (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1996) 175-85. The translations of Croce's quotations are my own. In the text, the titles of the works are indicated for the first time with the original Italian; they are then cited with the English translation.
3. Benedetto Croce, "Il progresso come stato d'animo e il progresso come concetto filosofico," in *Filosofia e storiografia*, ed. Stefano Maschietti (Naples: Bibliopolis 2005), 299-305.

by the last century, fiercely anti-progressive, not least because it is radically anti-Enlightenment. The twentieth century had several reasons for sustaining its polemic, and sometimes its battle, against the arguments of progress, at the level of both historical and mental experience. As readings that have led us by the hand into the stages of its twilight teach us, when progress appears in the pages of Croce's aesthetics, it has already decayed⁴.

Hence the whole problematic nature not so much of the still immature Croce formulation, but also of my proposal here: I seem to have chosen an extremely old theme in a work which, incidentally, a few years after publication, was considered by its author to be already prematurely aged. I will therefore try to frame my discussion from a somewhat different perspective.

This modern "scrap" has become an anachronism, an outdated word and concept, in many ways countercurrent⁵. And yet, every anachronism preserves intact a kernel of truth expelled by time, or toward which the present shows itself indifferent or insensitive. Progress, a non-contemporary concept, precisely by virtue of the anachronistic nature it has gained, can open up glimmers of meaning about the contemporary. This century, which seems to confirm the previous one as regards to the crisis and the refutation of the law of progress, which is reviving experiences that—we had nurtured this illusion—would never return, this "catastrophic" trend and the accompanying catastrophist mood clearly propose once again the question of the meaning of history.

The shelves and display cases of our bookstores are not much different from the ones Croce observed in 1933, when he drafted a note entitled "*Il mondo va verso...*" ("The World Is Moving Toward...")⁶. An excess production of Sense was denounced then, and could be denounced again today, on the part of the publishing market and elsewhere. A compulsive and frantic eagerness to answer the question "Where is the world going?" The excess arises from the abuse of an ability to forecast that it is projected into the future, when it should, much more modestly, be exercised in the present. As Croce wisely wrote in that note, wherever the world goes, whatever

4. Raffaello Franchini, *L'idea di progresso. Teoria e storia*, second edition (Naples, Giannini, 1979), and Gennaro Sasso, *Tramonto di un mito. L'idea di 'progresso' tra Ottocento e Novecento* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1988, 2nd ed.). See also Rosalia Peluso, "Critica e dialettica del progresso in Raffaello Franchini," *Archivio di Storia della Cultura*, 35 (2022), 393–403.
5. Cf. Aldo Schiavone, *Progresso* (Bologna: il Mulino, 2020).
6. Benedetto Croce, "Il mondo va verso...", in *Conversazioni critiche*, Series 5 (Bari: Laterza, 1951, 2nd ed.), 350–53.

imaginary sense one wishes to impart to history, one must rather ask “where each of us is going *now*.” Not least because, it would be written a few years later by Orwell and immediately transposed by Croce, in the control of the future—in which the programs to establish with certainty where the world is going come under—lies the totalitarian design to control the present, even at the cost of modifying the past⁷.

Progress is refined historically in the human attempt to give an answer to the eternal anguished question “where is the world going”. Other spiritual universes have drawn a progressive line and cast it to the extreme limit, imagining that this line would proceed indefinitely toward the moral progress of humanity, which is like saying the triumph of the kingdom of God on earth and thus the end of history. We certainly no longer need this mythological and illusionist progress. We do, however, need to reflect on progress as a “philosophical concept.” And, for this, we need Croce’s reflection on the subject which, even from his first hesitant attempts, aimed at punishing progress in its eighteenth-century matrix in order to rethink of it, however, and rehabilitate it as a concept of history, a principle that Croce never renounces in all his reconstructions. True, he had no predilection for the “*Essais sur le progrès*”⁸ and never hid that; early on, he unmasked its “illusions” with Sorel⁹; he analyzed it, with and beyond Hegel, as a speculative concept outside the philosophies of history. As such, he has always placed it in dialectical relation to its opposite, regress, decadence or, as we prefer to say today, catastrophe. All these distinctions and clarifications should suggest that the defense of progress is not an unfortunate and marginal episode that inadvertently escaped from Croce’s pen¹⁰.

7. Benedetto Croce, “La nuova disciplina del pensiero,” in *Nuove pagine sparse*, vol. 1 (Bari: Laterza, 1966), 193–204. This paper is a commentary on George Orwell’s *1984*. See Rosalia Peluso, “La filosofia italiana di fronte al Grande Fratello. Croce e Franchini lettori di Orwell,” *Diacritica*, 47 (February 25, 2023), www.diacritica.it.
8. Croce, *Il progresso come stato d’animo e il progresso come concetto filosofico*, 302.
9. Benedetto Croce, “Le illusioni del progresso nella storia moderna,” review of the Italian translation of Georges Sorel, *Les illusions du progrès* (1908), in Benedetto Croce, *Conversazioni critiche*, Series 1 (Bari: Laterza, 1950, 4th ed.), 285–89.
10. Sasso, *Il tramonto di un mito*, 272: apart from Marxism, which, despite Sorel’s *Les illusions du progrès* (1908) does not distrust the idea of progress, “it is perhaps not paradoxical to say that the only defense of this idea, in which a strong conceptual commitment and, in the background, an entire categorical system can be found, was provided, in the first half of the twentieth century, by Benedetto Croce.” See also Carlo Altini, “Croce e il concetto di progresso,” in *Croce e Gentile. La cultura italiana e l’Europa*, ed. Michele Ciliberto (Rome: Istituto dell’Enciclopedia Italiana, 2016), 740–46.

Since I cannot analyze here Croce's entire production on the subject and in order to respond to the review's address, I will mainly consider the aesthetic writings: specifically, the *Tesi di Estetica* (Theses on Aesthetics) of 1900 and *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (The Aesthetic as the Science of Expression and General Linguistic) of 1902. As Paolo D'Angelo has written, it is true that here we are faced with overall lackluster pages and provisional solutions¹¹. Surely, however, we find there a first manifestation of interest in a matter that concerns the meaning of history in general, and the application in it of the criterion of progress.

I come, then, to the reading of the texts.

The *Theses on Aesthetics* establishes an assumption that will never be revoked: progress is activity. Thus begins an articulate reflection that will attempt to define the contours and limits of progress in art. If, Croce writes against "false objectivity," there were indeed abstract schemes of art, models and exemplars by which the artist is inspired, then progress in the aesthetic field would consist in the adaptation of the work of art to the "model suspended in the metaphysical sky"¹². Progress would consist in the mathematical measure of the adaptation of the fact to the idea. But art is spirit. It is activity, not mechanical reproduction, or imitation of an ideal. Therefore "progress consists [...] in the activity itself" and "*aesthetic progress* is worth *aesthetic activity*"¹³. Progress is not achieved by the sum of the attempts made by artists to approximate the model, nor is decadence—the dialectical pendant of progress—the departure from the ideal reference. "Progress," the *Theses* concludes, "begins again with the beginning of a new cycle"¹⁴.

A little later, when the problem of the "historical interpretation"¹⁵ of art is being addressed, Croce returns to the theme of aesthetic progress. This time he assumes it not in the "rigorous"¹⁶ sense, previously fixed, but by alluding to an empirical use of the term, the one that, for example, before history, allows us to glimpse "progressive cycles" or interpret history according

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11. See Paolo D'Angelo, "L'estetica di Benedetto Croce," in *L'estetica italiana del Novecento* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 1997) 5-71, and Paolo D'Angelo, *Il problema Croce* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015).
 12. Benedetto Croce, *Tesi di Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale*, Anastatic reprint of the 1900 edition, ed. Felicità Audisio (Naples, Bibliopolis 2002), 14.
 13. Croce, *Tesi di Estetica*, 14-15.
 14. Croce, *Tesi di Estetica*, 15.
 15. Croce, *Tesi di Estetica*, 71.
 16. Croce, *Tesi di Estetica*, 71.

to one great progressive cycle, in which the regresses themselves form a substance of the process. An idea comes to the fore that will also be taken up in the *Aesthetic*, namely, progress thought of as “the ever-increasing accumulation of our historical cognition that makes us sympathize [empathize] with the artistic products of all peoples and all times, or [...] broadens our taste¹⁷”. It has not yet been said here but, again, “cumulative” progress—the sum of the cognitions that refine taste and make aesthetic education—is deferred to the act of thought that appropriates these cognitions. Progress is activity of thought. We could call progress that Event that corresponds to the mental act of the Kantian spectator before the experiences of history¹⁸. Carlo Antoni, in his *Commento a Croce* (Commentary on Croce), had already pointed out the Kantian matrix of the Croce theses on progress. This would be an interesting indication to pursue in more depth, but not in the present article. At most, the influence of Kant in early Croce’s aesthetics should be emphasized once again¹⁹.

Let us now move on to the *Aesthetic*, the 1902 treatise²⁰. Croce speaks of progress in Chapter 17, on the history of literature and art. In subsequent editions, the chapter does not undergo major “changes in concept” (1907 Introduction). Almost all the passages from the *Theses* flow into it, but the earlier reflections are expanded and become part of a broader treatment. Croce starts from the assumption that any reconstruction of human history assumes the “concept of progress” as its “constructive criterion²¹”.

An important distinction begins to emerge here. By progress we should not, in fact, mean “the fantastic law²²” which, according to a providential pattern that remains unchanged even in secularized philosophies of history, would execute a path that would lead humanity toward definitive goals. This supposed “logic²³” of history would be the “negation of history

17. Croce, *Tesi di Estetica*, 72.

18. A profound, though not explicit, harmony exists between the Croce theses and the Kantian theses on progress. This was first highlighted by Carlo Antoni in the chapter “Storia e progresso” in his *Commento a Croce* (Verona: Neri Pozza editore, 1955), 183-98.

19. See Paolo D’Angelo, “L’estetica di Benedetto Croce”; Paolo D’Angelo, *Il problema Croce*; and Marcello Mustè, *Croce* (Rome: Carocci, 2009).

20. Benedetto Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale*, 3 vols., ed. Felicità Audisio (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2014), vol. 1, 178-85.

21. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 178.

22. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 178.

23. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 178.

itself²⁴”, that is, of what history means: “contingency²⁵” that does not admit necessity, “freedom²⁶”, which is the main human ingredient that makes it possible to distinguish a “historical process²⁷” from a mechanical one. Thus, in the first instance, Croce admits a “legality” of progress, its being a “constructive criterion,” but it has nothing to do with the law of history of some Enlightenment and positivist mythologies of progress (in this regard, it must be argued that progress according to Croce is not even “the law of *evolution*,” which is a contradiction in terms: because if reality evolves, then it cannot be law; and if it becomes law, it becomes the same “law of progress” that has just been rejected).

By progress, the *Aesthetic* again confirms and specifies in greater detail, we must mean “*the very concept of human activity*”—a point we have already found was established in the *Theses*. The subsequent discussion clarifies the sense in which progress is a “constructive criterion.” It is the “determinate criterion” of the “historian of humanity,” who does not research and collect “unconnected facts” and chronicle them. This historian of humanity, whatever the “matter” of his inquiry, must possess “his own conviction about the concept of the facts whose history he assumes to narrate.” Until the 1904 edition, Croce speaks of the concept of progress as a constructive criterion, as the “*point of view*²⁸” of the authentic historian. Both editions consulted, 1904 and 1950, say that “from the confused and discordant mass of brute facts” one must derive “a thoughtful representation²⁹”. The next passage, however, undergoes perhaps the most significant change between the two editions because, in the *editio ne varietur*, Croce cautions that whatever history is being reconstructed, one must be familiar with the subject about which one is making history (with philosophy for the history of philosophy, with botany for the history of botany, with mathematics for the history of mathematics, and so on). In the 1904 edition, however, Croce had used the term regress in dialectical relation to the term progress, and had written:

24. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 178.

25. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 178.

26. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 178.

27. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 179.

28. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. II, 178. The expression “point of view” recurs somewhat later in the *editio ne varietur*: Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 180.

29. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 179, and vol. 2, 155 (in the *ne varietur* “thought” takes the place of “determined”).

The historian of a social movement must know the goal to which the movement relates; the historian of a nation will describe its *progress* and *regress* with respect to the ideals of *human civilization*; the historian of science, its *progress* and *regress* with respect to the conviction he has made of the truth of that science³⁰.

What disappears in the final edition? The dialectic of progress and regress disappears, but only because it has now become evident to the author that history, any history, being history of the positive, is history that takes on the negative in itself: the regressive moments of history become moments of the progressive vision of history itself³¹.

Proceeding still further in defining the “criterion” that the *Aesthetic* is telling us about and continuing in the vein of the polemic against objectivism already inaugurated in the *Theses*, Croce adds a further explanatory piece: the criterion we are reasoning about is a “subjective criterion³²”. Could it otherwise be a criterion that refers to the activity that “working on the supplied matter of nature, overcomes its obstacles and submits it to its purposes³³”? Only the “necessity” and “unfailingness³⁴” of this criterion is at the same time a guarantee of the “highest objectivity and impartiality

30. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 2, 155.

31. See, for example, Benedetto Croce, “Il concetto di decadenza,” in *Conversazioni critiche*, Series 5, 184-86: “The many books that were written, especially during the nineteenth century, on Progress and its law or rhythm, and its negative correlative which is decadence, all have, in general, this defect: of reducing a speculative problem to a naturalistic problem, and seeking in reality, naturalistically considered, a law that is only of the spirit. It is no wonder, then, that those treatises achieved little and were little considered and soon forgotten. The truth is that spirit itself is progress, and as such contains the moment of decadence in perpetuity: it is the rising from vitality or animality to the highest humanity, but also the coming to an end, and therefore the descent back into animality to begin a new ascending cycle. To ask whether or not the world is governed by the law of progress, and whether or not final decadence awaits it, or decadence interrupts its progress, is just as naive as to ask whether reality is life or death, or is going toward death, or is from time to time destroyed by death, when one knows that, in every moment, life is life and death, and would not be life if it were not death [...]. And since decadence is an eternal moment of progress itself, one must rid oneself of the illusion of progress without decadence (of the fantastic straight-line progress, to which the wise Goethe rightly contrasted spiral progress). The more intense the work of civilization has been, the more it is to be expected that it will keep behind it a slackening or a dark troubled struggling, which one must bravely prepare to face and surpass. Otherwise, it will shipwreck in desperate pessimism, and in believing and lamenting the very principles of humanity to be exhausted.”

32. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 179.

33. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 179.

34. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 179.

and thoroughness³⁵” in referring to “factual data³⁶”. There is no historian who is just a historian: the historian is always oriented by his subjective “point of view” and can therefore give rise to histories that are liberal and reactionary, metaphysical and empirical, idealistic and skeptical. The pure historian, like the pure philosopher, is an abstraction. When great historians write their histories, they are guided by their own “political and moral concepts³⁷”, and in their reconstructions, each exemplifies “his concept of progress and his criterion of judgment³⁸”.

Having posited the unavoidability of progress as a constructive criterion, and thus by necessity also a directive one and a subjective one, having established that any human history—still without partitions—cannot do without it, it is a matter of investigating, within the framework of aesthetics, the application of this criterion to artistic and literary histories. Here, the specific point of view corresponds to the need to possess a “concept of art³⁹” in advance: the analysis of works will be guided by this general concept. If I want to analyze a work of art, I must know in advance what art is, I must possess in advance my concept of art, which I will have formed as my own subjective constructive and directive criteria. Exactly as the historian of botany does with botany, of philosophy with philosophy, and so on. Rather, in this regard, clarification must be provided about the concept of progress that is assumed in art or science. It is much easier, Croce writes, to draw the history of science according to “a single line of progress and regress⁴⁰”. This single continuous line in art is not there. Because—and here we recall the theoretical threshold of the treatise—“art is intuition, and intuition is individuality, and individuality does not repeat itself⁴¹”. It would be a grave mistake to reconstruct art history along an evolutionary line, both “progressive and regressive⁴²”.

35. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 179.

36. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 179.

37. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 179.

38. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 180.

39. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 180.

40. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 181.

41. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 181.

42. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 181. The difference postulated here between scientific progress and aesthetic progress remains suspended. In the *editio ne varietur* Croce suppresses a passage that instead appears in the 1904 *Aesthetic* and explains this difference: “The difference between artistic and literary history and the history of science could also be formulated thus: science is a single work of art, to which all mankind collaborates over the centuries; and therefore it forms a single progressive cycle: the other works of art each have their own problem

Perhaps, therefore, we have entered an impasse here? Have we not just been told that the only concept of progress is that which collimates with activity overcoming passivity? That in reflecting on the forms in which this activity has been expressed, a direction and a point of view must be taken? Perhaps that artistic and literary history invalidate this just established principle as an inescapable necessity of the historian of humanity? The solution Croce proposes recalls the one already advanced in the *Theses*: only by generalizing and reasoning abstractly and very fantastically can one admit that art history has its “progressive cycles, but each with its own problem, and progressive only with respect to that problem⁴³”. When, hypothetically, would progress occur in art or poetry? When many, Croce concludes, have worked on the same matter, have tried to express it in the most suitable form, and only when the best result succeeds can one speak of progress. Progress is not Goethe winning over Homer, just as regress is not Shakespeare winning over Dante. Progress could be made, for example, when the same subject matter, let us take the chivalric subject matter, after Ariosto, who brought it to its highest fulfillment, would only be “repetition,” “imitation,” “exaggeration⁴⁴”. Individuality does not repeat itself, Croce wrote a moment ago. Thus the spiritual worlds behind the work are incomparable to each other.

All the preliminary talk on the exact meaning of progress (a constructive and subjective criterion of historical interpretation) should therefore have led to the conclusion already established in the *Theses*: it is no coincidence that the passage already quoted about the accumulation of knowledge, the refinement of our taste, and the process of empathy with past eras takes over from these reflections. With one more addition to the 1900 *Memoria, L'arte ridotta sotto il concetto generale della storia* (Art reduced under the general concept of history)⁴⁵ Strictly speaking, at least as it so far described,

and their own cycle. And one could show the analogy and difference in the history of man's practical activity, in which the commonality of the human ideal (freedom of spirit) makes possible a general history of civilization, where a history of individual goals, of merely economic activity, always remains fragmentary and almost biographical” (vol. 1, 158-59).

43. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 181-82.

44. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 182.

45. Benedetto Croce, “La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte” (1893), in Id., *Primi saggi* (1918) (Bari: Laterza, 1951³) 1-41. For more recent reprints see also Benedetto Croce and Pasquale Villari, *Controversie sulla storia (1891-1893)*, ed. Renata Viti Cavaliere (Milan: Unicopli, 1993), and Benedetto Croce, *La storia ridotta sotto il concetto generale dell'arte*, ed. Giuseppe Galasso (Milan: Adelphi, 2017).

this is the only possible form of “aesthetic progress⁴⁶”. Identifying another exception, however, Croce says that aesthetic progress could also be “the greater abundance of artistic intuitions⁴⁷”—those happy times of art and poetry that animate the “renaissances”—or the capacity for vision and contemplation of art (but here, the progress would be in the eye of the beholder). What, then, have we gleaned from this reflection?

The *Theses* tell us that progress is not the adaptation of the work to the ideal model, but that progress is aesthetic activity (since progress is activity); that is why it lies better in the eye of the beholder than in the material history of art and literature.

The *Aesthetic* takes up these two concepts from the *Theses*—the progress/activity equation and the subjective conception of the observer—but it also makes several additions: first, against the mythologies of progress, it establishes the concept of progress—which is always activity—as a constructive and subjective criterion of historical interpretation. This implies that it presides over the writing of any history. However, upon moving to the operational dimension—the application of the criterion of progress to artistic and literary history—the picture becomes complicated: the cases in which one can weakly speak of aesthetic progress are extremely circumscribed: to the subjective criterion of the observer, the refinement of taste and sympathy for certain epochs, one adds here the historical intensity of the insights that produce art.

A contradiction seems to become apparent, for the criterion that is indispensable for history would be ineffective for artistic and literary histories, which in Chapter 17 of the *Aesthetic* are being legitimized. One can make barely metaphorical use of aesthetic progress. Therefore, on the one hand we are faced with a truth for history, and on the other with its refutation in art. We cannot precisely define whether aesthetic progress exists or not. Has something deeper perhaps happened? Has something cracked in the way art and history, *gemmae ortae*, represent the individual?

This and other questions that the *Aesthetic* raises and does not resolve are answered by later works. In *La poesia* (The Poetry)⁴⁸ of 1936, for example,

46. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 183.

47. Croce, *Estetica*, vol. 1, 184.

48. Benedetto Croce, *La poesia. Introduzione alla critica e storia della poesia e della letteratura*, ed. Cecilia Castellani, with a Note by Gennaro Sasso (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2017).

Croce dissolves our doubts by posing the question himself: in the history of poetry, is the “essential concept of history, which is that of progress⁴⁹”, lost? If, indeed, every work of art, every poem seems to have in itself all the perfection that permits the expression of judgment, it “would have its own progress solely in the very travail of its making⁵⁰”. The same applies to the “products” of every other spiritual activity, a truth thought about, a good deed done: each possesses in itself its own perfection and progress, the fact that it is itself progress. An important note follows:

General historical progress is not progress of spiritual categories and forms, which are its operatives, and such would not be if they did not have constancy and did not always generate definite and concrete beauties, truths, and moral acts; but it is the motion of the spirit in the dialectic of all its forms⁵¹.

In the *Postilla Sul significato del non progresso in poesia* (Postscript on the meaning of non-progress in poetry), Croce clarifies the sense in which a “progress in the spiritual category” should be excluded⁵². Common sense hardly discerns progress in art or morals; each time it starts over again. Things appear that way if one maintains the scientific measure of progress, i.e. the one that corresponds to an accumulation of knowledge. Here, further clarification of progress as “motion of the spirit” also falls down. Progress is not “the ever-increasing number of cognitions or the ever-increasing historical complexity of them”; progress and progressive is “*the act for itself of knowing*, in which evidently the mind also begins anew each time, each time falling back into darkness and re-emerging into light⁵³”.

We thus have a synthesis of complex Croce reasoning. Already from the time of the *Theses* and the so-called “Great” *Aesthetic*, Croce had postulated progress as spiritual activity. He needed to clarify that this progress

49. Croce, *La poesia*, 126.

50. Croce, *La poesia*, 126.

51. Croce, *La poesia*, 127.

52. Croce, *La poesia*, 310. In fact, the idea that progress is not of the categories but of concreteness was a principle already established in *Logica*, 335. Here, while Croce is discussing the “phenomenology of error” that seems to remove any validity from philosophical progress, he specifies that “philosophy, taken in itself, that is, as an abstract category, does not progress, just as the category of art or that of morality does not progress. But philosophy, in its concreteness, progresses, like art and all life; it progresses, because reality is unfolding, and unfolding, including antecedents in consequents, is progress.”

53. Croce, *La poesia*, 310 (italics my own).

is not the progress of categories, which instead remain constant, but overall movement of the spirit in the dialectic of its forms. That progress thought of, since the days of the *Aesthetic*, as refinement of taste and critical eye, sympathy with certain past epochs, accumulation of cognition and richness of insight, has now been resolved in the very act of knowing. A term from German aesthetics expresses this well, although Croce finds it only reductively applied to the arts, since it should extend to every “spiritual act”: *Inselhaftigkeit*, “insularity,” “the act of beginning and ending in itself[s]”⁵⁴. Progress is of the spirit, a condition of the “mind,” which each time begins anew, regressing and progressing.

To conclude, Croce thinks of progress not in the humoral perspective, which discerns progress and regress in unrelated events and tunes its own mood on them; he thinks of it instead in the over-affective and theoretical perspective of the philosophical concept: and this is the perspective we are interested in highlighting here. He interprets it as the criterion from which histories are constructed: in *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (History as Thought and Action)⁵⁵, a work that also contains valuable notes on progress, he will say that historiography frees us from the burden of the past; progress is the “point of view,” the critical approach that the historian must necessarily perfect. While making the concept valid for human history, however, the application of the criterion to art evidently comes to a standstill. This stalemate is overcome by the principle that progress cannot apply to the single category of beauty because, being a category, it has no history, undergoes no evolution or regression. In any case, even when progress is taken as the “act of knowing,” “motion of the spirit,” “law of the spirit and law of history”⁵⁶, art is confirmed as a hard field for the applicability of the general criterion. This is because it perhaps sets before us spiritual geographies on which progress not only barely moves but on which it does not even seem to germinate. We seem to be confronted with a discontinuous, rhapsodic, and vital vegetation that, a few years later, in Croce’s lexicon will take on “raw and green” features. But this is obviously another story of the rise and fall of the idea of progress.

54. Croce, *La poesia*, 310.

55. Benedetto Croce, “La storia come azione,” in *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, ed. Maria Conforti, with a Note by Gennaro Sasso (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2002) 45–49.

56. Croce, *Il progresso come stato d'animo e il progresso come concetto filosofico*, 302.

ABSTRACT

Progress in the contemporary world is often considered as something for the scrap heap, an “anachronism,” which reflection on history is obliged to do without. It has been the logic of events, from the twentieth century onward, that has made a desecrating, continuous declaration of the fallibility of that law which, since the Enlightenment, seemed to govern the course of human history. Benedetto Croce reflected at length on the idea of progress and pointed out several critical aspects of it. In his most mature reflection on history, he distinguished progress as a “state of mind” from progress as a “philosophical concept”: if we can and must learn to do without the former, because it has no scientific-philosophical foundation, the latter must instead be recovered in a dialectical vision of history that knows the criterion of progression, but is always associated with that of regression, decadence, and catastrophe. In short, only a dialectical view of history teaches us to consider the positive and the negative together. This article discusses Croce’s early thinking on progress: it considers his early writings on aesthetics and shows how the contradictions of progress were already visible when Croce was discussing progress applied to poetry or art. These tentative theories on aesthetic progress help to identify lines of philosophy of history in Croce’s aesthetics. This is possible due to the deep connection Croce establishes between art and history.

Keywords: Benedetto Croce, progress, aesthetics, philosophy of History, decadence, poetry.

**QU’EST-CE QUE LE PROGRÈS ESTHÉTIQUE ? QUELQUES ÉLÉMENTS
DE PHILOSOPHIE DE L’HISTOIRE DANS L’ESTHÉTIQUE DE CROCE**

RÉSUMÉ

Dans le monde contemporain, la notion de progrès doit être considérée comme un «rebut», un «anachronisme», dont la réflexion sur l’histoire doit se passer. La logique des événements, à partir du XXe siècle, a exposé la faillibilité de cette loi qui, depuis les Lumières, semblait régir le cours de l’histoire humaine. Benedetto Croce a longuement réfléchi sur l’idée de progrès et en a souligné diverses limites. Dans sa réflexion la plus aboutie sur l’histoire, il distingue le progrès comme «état d’esprit» du progrès comme «concept philosophique» : si l’on peut et doit apprendre à se passer du premier, parce qu’il n’a pas de fondement scientifique ni philosophique, le second doit en revanche être réinvesti dans une vision dialectique de l’histoire qui reconnaît un critère de la progression, toujours en lien avec celui de la régression, de la décadence, de la catastrophe. En un mot, seule une vision dialectique de l’histoire permet de considérer ensemble le positif et le négatif. Cet article traite des premières réflexions de Croce sur le progrès : nous examinons ses premiers écrits sur l’esthétique et montrons comment les contradictions du progrès étaient déjà visibles lorsque Croce discutait du progrès relativement à la poésie ou à l’art. Ces thèses préliminaires sur le progrès esthétique permettent d’identifier

des éléments de philosophie de l'histoire dans l'esthétique de Croce, ce qui est rendu possible par le lien profond que Croce établit entre l'art et l'histoire.

Mots-clés : Benedetto Croce, progrès, esthétique, philosophie de l'histoire, décadence, poésie.

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