

**Benedetto Croce**



*The Essence  
of Aesthetic*

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# **The Essence of Aesthetic**



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# Preface by Douglas Ainslie

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## PREFACE

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WHEN I first visited Naples, in 1909, I was quite unprepared for making the discovery of a new philosopher, and nothing was further from my mind than to become his prophet to the English-speaking world. Yet so it has happened.

If I may be permitted the use of metaphor and to take the eternal activities of the spirit of man as equivalent to the eternal ideas of Plato, yet far more real than they, because immanent and not transcendental, and if I may push yet further the metaphor and figure these activities of the spirit as *planets*, then one might say that Croce is the Adams-Leverrier of philosophy, and his Theory of Æsthetic the discovery of the planet Neptune. For just as those astronomer-mathematicians proved the independent existence of that planet, hitherto unknown, by observing the perturbations it set up throughout the planetary system, so Croce has proved the independent existence of Æsthetic, the last of the great planetary activities of the spirit of man to come into line with thought. Just as the action of Neptune was falsely attributed to other causes, so the action of Æsthetic has been falsely confused with Ethic, Economic and Logic. Croce has disentangled and proved its independence. And just as we can now say that there is no

other planet to be discovered in the heavens, so we can say that there is no other activity of the spirit to be discovered.

Returning to 1909 and my visit to Naples, I was not long in finding a copy of the “*Estetica*,” and a single reading made clear to me its supreme importance. Although first published in 1901, no notice whatever had been taken of it in the English-speaking world. How long this might have continued, it is idle to surmise, but the fact that by far the greatest history of Italian literature (De Sanctis’), which dates from about the middle of last century, yet awaits translation and is little known in Great Britain, leads one to suppose that a like fate might have been in store for Croce’s discovery.

That is now for ever averted, as I have had the pleasure and privilege of presenting the English-speaking world with my translation of the “*Complete System of the Philosophy of the Spirit*,” in four volumes, besides other works by the master, such as the application of the theories of the *Æsthetic* to the greatest poets of Europe: Dante, Ariosto, Shakespeare, Corneille, to name them chronologically.

The present little volume, entirely original in statement, contains, as the author says, the condensation of his most important thoughts upon the subject of *Æsthetic*. In his belief, it may prove of use to young folk and others who wish to study poetry, and art in general, seriously. He is of opinion that the study of *Æsthetic* is perhaps better adapted to the understanding of philosophy than that of any other branch, for no other subject awakens youthful interest so soon as art and poetry. Logic remains, perhaps, rather severe and abstract, *Ethic* is apt to sound too like a

“preachment,” and what is called “Psychology” is rather a turning away from than a guide to Philosophy. The problems of art, on the other hand, not only lead more easily to the habit of thought upon themselves, but also whet the appetite and sharpen the teeth for biting into the marrow of those other problems, which, since all are contained in the spirit, form with it an ideal whole.

Little remains to be said, beyond mentioning that the “Essence of Æsthetic” was originally written by Croce and translated by me to celebrate the inauguration of the great Rice Institute, of Houston, Texas, in 1912. Croce was invited to address the University personally, but he was even then too busy with his own country’s affairs and his enormous literary labours, and the learned and courteous President Odell Lovett therefore kindly accepted the written essay in lieu of the actual presence of the philosopher. I was also, and for the same reason, obliged to decline, on his behalf, the giving of the Gifford Lectures in 1912.

The University of Columbia has recently presented Croce with its gold medal for the most original and important contribution to literature during the past five years, and his present position in the Italian Government as Cabinet Minister and Minister for Education (accepted solely from a sense of duty) are, I think, proof that his merits are beginning to be recognised.

Plato, returning discomfited from Sicily, where he had failed to realise his conception of the Philosopher-King, would have taken heart could he have seen his remote brother and descendant, a scion of Greater Greece, so valiantly, so disinterestedly, ruling alike in the worlds of

thought and practical life. For did he not lay it down as a condition that those only should rule who would fain be left to their lofty meditations?

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*January, 1921.*

*Postscript.*—I should like to thank my learned friend, the Librarian of the India Office, Dr. F. W. Thomas, M.A., Trinity College, Cambridge, for kindly reading the proofs of this work and making certain valuable suggestions.

# “What is Art?”

## THE ESSENCE OF ÆSTHETIC



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#### “WHAT IS ART?”

IN reply to the question, “What is art?” it might be said jocosely (but this would not be a bad joke) that art is what everybody knows it to be. And indeed, if it were not to some extent known what it is, it would be impossible even to ask that question, for every question implies a certain knowledge of what is asked about, designated in the question and therefore known and qualified. A proof of this is to be found in the fact that we often hear just and profound ideas in relation to art expressed by those who make no profession of philosophy or of theory, by laymen, by artists who do not like to reason, by the ingenuous, and even by the common people: these ideas are sometimes implicit in judgments concerning particular works of art, but at others assume altogether the form of aphorisms and of definitions. Thus people have come to believe in the possibility of making blush, at will, any proud philosopher who should fancy himself to have “discovered” the nature of art, by placing before his eyes or making ring in his ears propositions taken from the most superficial books or phrases of the most ordinary conversation, and showing



that they already most clearly contained his vaunted discovery.

And in this case the philosopher would have good reason to blush—that is, had he ever nourished the illusion of introducing into universal human consciousness, by means of his doctrines, something altogether original, something extraneous to this consciousness, the revelation of an altogether new world. But he does not blush, and continues upon his way, for he is not ignorant that the question as to what is art (as indeed every philosophical question as to the nature of the real, or in general every question of knowledge), even if by its use of language it seem to assume the aspect of a general and total problem, which it is claimed to solve for the first and last time, has always, as a matter of fact, a *circumscribed* meaning, referable to the particular difficulties that assume vitality at a determined moment in the history of thought. Certainly, truth does walk the streets, like the *esprit* of the well known French proverb, or like metaphor, “queen of tropes” according to rhetoricians, which Montaigne discovered in the *babil* of his *chambrière*. But the metaphor used by the maid is the solution of a problem of expression proper to the feelings that affect the maid at that moment; and the obvious affirmations that by accident or intent one hears every day as to the nature of art, are solutions of logical problems, as they present themselves to this or that individual, who is not a philosopher by profession, and yet as man is also to some extent a philosopher. And as the maid’s metaphor usually expresses but a small and vulgar world of feeling compared with that of the poet, so the obvious affirmation of one who

is not a philosopher solves a problem small by comparison with that which occupies the philosopher. The answer as to what is art may appear similar in both cases, but is different in both cases owing to the different degree of richness of its intimate content; because the answer of the philosopher worthy of the name has neither more nor less a task than that of solving in an adequate manner all the problems as to the nature of art that have arisen down to that moment in the course of history; whereas that of the layman, since it revolves in a far narrower space, shows itself to be impotent outside those limits. Actual proof of this is also to be found in the force of the eternal Socratic method, in the facility with which the learned, by pressing home their questions, leave those without learning in open-mouthed confusion, though these had nevertheless begun by speaking well; but now finding themselves in danger of losing in the course of the inquiry what small knowledge they possessed, they have no resource but to retire into their shell, declaring that they do not like “subtleties.”

The philosopher’s pride is based therefore solely upon the greater intensity of his questions and answers; a pride not unaccompanied with modesty—that is, with the consciousness that, if his sphere be wider, or the largest possible, at a determined moment, yet it is limited by the history of that moment, and cannot pretend to a value of totality, or what is called a *definitive* solution. The ulterior life of the spirit, renewing and multiplying problems, does not so much falsify, as render inadequate preceding solutions, part of them falling among the number of those truths that are understood, and part needing to be again