

# The concentric critique. Schlosser's *Kunstliteratur* and the paradigm of style in Croce and Vossler

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In the introduction of his *Storia della Critica d'Arte* ('History of Art Criticism'), Lionello Venturi recalls the monumental enterprise undertaken by Julius von Schlosser in the field of art literature emphasizing its philological nature:

'The work by Julius [von] Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur* (1924), had a well deserved success. Taken as a catalogue raisonné of written sources of art history from the Middle Ages to the end of the eighteenth century one could not have expected anything better. One can find in it very good yet fragmentary insights and judgments pertaining to the sphere of art criticism, due to the fact that the author was more interested in the historical data than in the critical values'<sup>1</sup>.

Venturi, in limiting the territory of analysis explored by Schlosser to a philologically-based investigation (in which attention to the 'historical data' prevails over any attempt to establishing 'critical values' regarding the textual sources of art history), ends by considering *Die Kunstliteratur* as a field of research symmetrically related to principles and methods adopted by antiquarians and 'eruditi.' For this very reason, he was primarily committed to the codification of taxonomical coordinates for the study of art's literary sources. Venturi seems to conclude, therefore, that Schlosser's volume should be praised as the commendable result of positivistic premises applied to the field of art literature.

As the present essay will attempt to demonstrate, Schlosser's critical construction, although deeply grounded in the field of philology, should not be considered as a linear cataloguing of literary sources related to the sphere of art. On the contrary, his method should be analyzed in the light of a specific grid of epistemological references, namely, Benedetto Croce's aesthetics and Karl Vossler's linguistics. In the past, scholars have pointed out Croce's influence over Schlosser in several academic publications. Paradoxically the extent of such an 'influence' and its ramified modalities of manifestation still remain to be examined in detail. The present contribution will therefore address the analysis of some philosophical concepts that Schlosser has unequivocally derived from Croce's meditations; it will

<sup>1</sup> L. Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1936; trans. *Storia della critica d'arte*, Rome: Edizioni U, 1945. On Lionello Venturi, see R. De Mambro Santos, *Opera al bivio. Alle origini della moderna storiografia critica dell'arte*, Sant'Oreste (Rome): Apeiron Editori, 2001; and also G. C. Sciolla, *La critica d'arte del Novecento*, Turin: UTET, 1995.

also provide an examination (not yet undertaken by any art historian) regarding Schlosser's personal debt to Karl Vossler, a friend and mentor to whom *Die Kunstliteratur* was dedicated.

### The unreachable beauty: Schlosser and Croce

Printed in Vienna, in 1924, Schlosser's *Kunstliteratur* presents, with important additions and revisions, a series of studies previously appeared in the 'Journal of the Academy of Sciences of Vienna' under the title *Materialien zur Quellenkunde der Kunstgeschichte* ('Materials to the Study of the Sources of the History of art')<sup>2</sup>. Schlosser's impressive contribution in the field of art historiography focuses on the fundamental role played by written sources in the processes of creation and interpretation of works of art. Initially conceived as intertwined sections for a scholarly manual on the historiography of art, the chapters of *Die Kunstliteratur* have been radically changed by the author after his decisive encounter with Benedetto Croce's *Estetica* ('Aesthetics'), printed in Italy in 1902. In fact, as Schlosser recalls in a paragraph of his autobiographical 'Comments on My Life,' 'the knowledge of [Croce's] ideas became the greatest, truest spiritual event of my whole life and produced in me a complete rejuvenation, a second youth'<sup>3</sup>.

For Schlosser, profoundly influenced by Croce, the study of literary sources will assume a new configuration in his mind, a development that will make it possible for him to reconcile his former positivistic methods (which had developed in the core of the so-called 'School of Vienna' in contact with scholars of the caliber of Joseph Daniel Böhm, Rudolf von Eitelberger, and Franz Wickhoff) with more idealistic directives. As Schlosser recalls,

the preliminary drafts for those articles [i.e. the future chapters of *Die Kunstliteratur*] date back very far in the past,' Schlosser remembers, 'and were probably originated by my very tendencies as a bibliophile and a collector; it allowed me to put together a rather relevant and almost complete private library, specialized in Italian texts concerning the art of the past. These sources form the 'material', or blocks of a construction, in order to establish not only a 'documentation' but more importantly a history of the remotest theories and historiographies of art, as they now appear to me under the influence of Croce.'<sup>4</sup>

It is quite evident, therefore, that Schlosser's ambitious project has gone through a significant methodological readjustment, thanks to 'the influence of Croce.' From this

<sup>2</sup> J. von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur. Ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, Vienna: A. Schroll & Co., 1924; trans. *La Letteratura artistica. Manuale delle fonti della storia dell'arte*, Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1988. On Schlosser, see R. De Mambro Santos, *Viatico viennese. La storiografia critica di Julius von Schlosser e la metodologia filosofica di Benedetto Croce*, Sant'Oreste (Rome): Apeiron Editori, 1998. More recent bibliography can be found in M. Trimann, 'Julius von Schlosser (1866-1938)' in *Klassiker der Kunstgeschichte. Con Winckelmann bis Warburg*, München: Beck, 2008, 194-213.

<sup>3</sup> J. von Schlosser, *Commentario della mia vita*, in J. von Schlosser, *La storia dell'arte nelle esperienze e nei ricordi di un suo cultore*: G. Laterza & Figli, 1936, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Schlosser, *Commentario*, 21.

moment on, the literary sources will represent to Schlosser a pregnant and reliable witness of the material conditions under which a work of art had been created. For this reason, they will assume a central position in the historical process of reconstruction of the creative path, in accordance with one of the most important postulates of Croce's *Estetica*, namely the identity of *intuition* and *expression*. Accordingly to these philosophical premises, the same body of knowledge that guided the artist along the routes of creation—culminating in the making of a concrete work of art, unique and unrepeatable—should be used by future spectators as an indispensable set of critical parameters for the critical appreciation of artistic creations.

This explains why Schlosser emphasized so strongly the theoretical nature of the literary sources that should be included in *Die Kunstliteratur*. In the critical perspective of Idealism, indeed, the literary sources are regarded as valuable reminiscences of the intuitive process of creation: a process that would otherwise remain inextricably hidden in the inner fibers of the artwork. The literary sources have to be interpreted then as *intentional* tracks of individual processes, even in cases of 'unconscious' formulations. On the other hand, these sources will make it possible for the spectator to understand the interior dimension of the artwork, under the guidance of a historical method of interpretation. Even though unable to reach the primordial, superior sphere of the aesthetic *intuition*, the spectator could nevertheless explore the shared territory of *expression* and admire its collective components. For this motive, Schlosser strategically excludes from his perspective of analysis all kinds of written source that, in spite of their relevance as historical *documents* (as in the case of archive records or notary agreements), do not present an incisively theoretical basis. In fact, the sources analyzed by Schlosser in *Die Kunstliteratur* will be primarily characterized as premeditated traces of thoughts, theories, and ideas related to the very process of making art. In other words, they will be able to bring to light—even after many centuries—problems, hypothesis, and concepts directly connected to the individual roads of creation.

In surpassing the philological coordinates that characterized his early academic career until the decisive encounter with Croce, Schlosser redirects his interest toward the foundation of a historical method of research based on idealistic assumptions. Accordingly then, the main goal of his investigations will no longer be the achievement of a rational understanding of the work of art; rather, he will focus on an evocative, suggestive description of its potential aesthetic implications. Thus conceived, Schlosser's critique will not display any cognitive function, nor will it have any connection to the field of logic; but, incisively, he will reproduce as accurately as possible, by means of metaphors and allusions, the poetic experiences that inspired the original work of art.

The radical shift noticeable in Schlosser's method—under the new guidance of Croce—is the subject of a remarkably lucid analysis provided by Schlosser himself in the introductory pages of *Die Kunstliteratur*. In a brief but dense paragraph entitled, 'Idea and extension of the sources of art history,' the author states:

The science of the sources should first of all explore the effectively existing textual material, in order to transmit it at least as a bibliography. It goes forward and reaches a highest level with the critical elaboration of such a

material into a grid that, needless to say, must be adapted according to the single periods. Ultimately it reaches the rank of an autonomous historical discipline, comparable to any other 'auxiliary science'—to use once again this quite inaccurate expression—thanks to the demonstration of the intrinsic historical value of this material, considered with philosophical spirit, and becoming inevitably, in more recent times, the history of our own discipline.<sup>5</sup>

The path described by Schlosser indicates that, from a preliminary collection of bibliographical data, arranged in accordance with well-established philological principles, the study of the sources should proceed towards a critical reordering of this material, based this time on historical premises, to finally reach the ultimate destination of the aesthetic evaluation (or, in Croce's terminology, the 'aesthetic comprehension'): a process necessarily rooted on solid philosophical grounds. The literary sources thus examined will enable scholars to reconcile the (positivistic) paradigms of philology with the (idealistic) *loci* of philosophy in the process of interpretation. It is not possible therefore to limit Schlosser's critical construction to a mere 'philological critique of the sources related to the history of art,' as stressed by Lionello Venturi<sup>6</sup>, given the remarkable shift of its epistemological coordinates in the making of *Die Kunstliteratur*. Newly conceived as a humanistic discipline, supported by philological and philosophical principles, art literature will posit as a goal a historically and theoretically grounded explanation of the very process of artistic creation. Thanks to a systematic return to textual sources, art literature will allow a wide spectrum of spectators to *re- evoke* the individual moment in which a work had been intuitively conceived and materially expressed by the artist.

Paradoxically, though, the aesthetic value of an artwork could never be entirely grasped by anyone except the artist himself (*in the very* moment of creation) due to its private, personal—and therefore *unrepeatable*—dimension, since a unique, individual *intuition* has to correspond to a likewise unique, personal *expression*. From the perspective of Croce's Idealism and Schlosser's epistemological dichotomy, the concept of 'style' will appear directly linked to the artist's 'personality', tangibly inscribed in the actual structure of the work of art as the aesthetic imprinting of a creative mind. On the other hand, though, the 'style' will not be definable in rational terms nor will it be perfectly imitable by any other master. As the tangible evidence of a profoundly individual quality, the 'style' will become the epicenter of an idealistic process of *re- evocation*, a process to be undertaken backwards, *a contrario*, along a path in which the cultivated spectator will be able to surpass the general, common features displayed on the surface of an artwork to reach its deepest aesthetic essence: the sphere of a truly personal creation. During this process, the work of art will become the converging point of two different perspectives, making it possible the fusion of the artist's unique intuition and the spectator's individual experiences.

Closely following Croce's ideas regarding the identity of *intuition* and *expression*, Schlosser establishes a quite rigid distinction between the realm of the artistic production (as an individual process culminating in the appearance of a

<sup>5</sup> Schlosser, *Kunstliteratur*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Venturi, *Storia*, 43.

personal *style*) and the collective sedimentation of the aesthetic values shared within a precise context (summarized, on the opposite, by the concept of *language*). Given that, according to Croce, the work of art really 'beautiful' and 'expressive' had its origin in the flourishing jet of an individual spring—namely the creative *intuition*—the critical evaluation of its aesthetic qualities should obey inescapably the same set of principles, paradigms and precepts that guided the artist (even unconsciously) during the process of creation. When regarded as a promising personal solution of general aesthetic problems (expressed by the artist through the demiurgic act of *expression*), the work should therefore be examined (or poetically contemplated) in its exquisitely individual features and not in its ordinary components. In fact, in both Croce's and Schlosse's pages, one is invited to find and define the purifying individuality of the *style*, instead of contemplating the collective homologation of the *language*.

Taking his cue from Croce, Schlosser draws the convulsion that art is an essentially intuitive process as personal as unique. Consequently, the history of art should be engaged with the study of authentically individual contributions carried out by the various masters in the different times. As a body of knowledge as much as a field of research, the history of art should be primarily concerned with the very definition of what is 'unique', 'unrepeatable,' and truly 'personal' in a work of art. In other words, it should search for the essence of *style*. On the other hand, the history of culture should take into account first of all the general, commonly shared components that make it possible to establish connections between the artist (even the more isolated one) and his specific context of production, demonstrating as analytically as possible the conventional nature of the *language*, its interpersonal modalities of diffusion. According to this model of interpretation, the 'History of Art' (*Kunstgeschichte*)—considered as an academic discipline intrinsically related to the 'Art Literature' (*Kunsthistorie*)—should provide an *ekphrastic* reconstruction of the individual qualities of 'beauty' conveyed in a work of art (i.e. its *style*) and leave to other disciplines—such as the 'History of Culture' (*Kulturgeschichte*)—the attempt of analyzing any extra-aesthetic or external factor, any social, material, ideological condition involved with the artistic creation (i.e. its *language*).

The philosophical differences between *style* ('art') and *language* ('non-art') have been clearly enunciated by Croce not only in the pages of his *Estetica*, but also in a programmatic essay written around 1917 and printed in 1926 with the title *Il carattere di totalità dell'espressione artistica* ('The Character of Totality of the Artistic Expression'). In this paragraph, the philosopher has formulated a precise boundary between the so-called *grandi maestri* ('great masters') and the '*artisti mediocri*' ('mediocre artists'), linking the former to the history of 'style' and relegating the latter to the sphere of 'mere documents.' If the 'great masters' appear definitely superior to Croce's eyes, magnificently unreachable in their detachment from any historical conditioning, the 'mediocre artists,' on the contrary, demonstrate evident connections with their own historical context and most certainly adopt visual codes widely diffused among the members of their artistic circle:

Thus the observation often made according to which the inferior artists are much more documentary regarding their own lives and societies than the

superior artists, who transcend their own time, and society, and even themselves as practical men.<sup>7</sup>

To transcend one's context means, in Croce's pages (and by extension in Schlosser's writings as well) to consider the visible world as an aesthetic horizon of reference from which the artist should necessarily depart in order to provide his personal *re*-formulation. Transforming as radically as possible the raw material found in a purely phenomenological sphere into something new, the artist creates a unique work of art. This rigid—and somehow too mechanical—distinction between art and culture, artist and context, presented as two elements totally separated from each other and completely unrelated, will eventually dictate the insurmountable limit of both Croce's aesthetic meditations and Schlosser's critical method. Comparable to an intuitive monad, the figure of the artist—the 'great master' in Croce's definition—will undauntedly pursue along his own creative road, casting indifferent glances at the surrounding world. As a superior being, he will contain *a priori* every element required by the aesthetic process of transformation through which an *intuition* (that is to say, something 'unique and unrepeatable' in Croce's words) will assume the shapes, colors, and lines formulated by a specific *expression* (once again, something 'unique and unrepeatable'), thus creating 'a form that, individualizing, combines the individuality with the universality, and therefore becomes universal'<sup>8</sup>.

During this process, art will produce the idealistic synthesis of personal experiences and the vast field of expressions, perfectly embodied (*'inverato'*) in the structure of the work of art. For example, on the one hand, the 'great masters,' in their remarkably personal poetic inventions, become the actual sources of the *style*, then, on the other hand, the material context will stimulate the transformation of these personal codes into the collective tools of the language, transmitted in a manner that Schlosser has described as 'historical grammar'<sup>9</sup>. If the *style* corresponds to the unprecedented aesthetic propositions formulated by the artists, the general field of *language* will indicate all those components present in a work of art which belong to the set of habits, commonplaces, and ordinary signs shared by the members of a given community. Such peremptory and segregated distinctions will be, in fact, the basic paradox of Croce's *Estetica* and will likewise generate the critical ambiguities noticeable in *Die Kunstliteratur*, determining its intrinsic fragility from a hermeneutical as well as a heuristic point of view. Since the historical context related to the making of a work of art and the very aesthetic qualities displayed in its structure *will not have* any direct connection, but will have only accidental relations according to Croce and Schlosser, the critically-based understanding of a work and its aesthetically-inspired evaluation will not only pursue different goals but will also

<sup>7</sup> 'Da ciò l'osservazione più volte fatte, che gli artisti inferiori si dimostrano assai più documentari rispetto alla propria vita e alla società del loro tempo che non gli artisti superiori, i quali trascendono il tempo, la società e sé medesimi in quanto uomini pratici', in B. Croce, *Il carattere di totalità dell'espressione artistica* in *Nuovi saggi di estetica*, Bari: G. Laterza & Figli, 1926; reprinted Naples: Bibliopolis, 1991, 116.

<sup>8</sup> 'una forma che, individualizzando, armonizza l'individualità con l'universalità, e perciò nell'atto stesso universalizza', in Croce, *Il carattere*, 116.

<sup>9</sup> On the concept of 'historical grammar,' see O. Kurz, *Julius von Schlosser. Personalità metodo lavoro* in J. Von Schlosser, *L'arte del medioevo*, Turin: Einaudi Editore, 1989, XXXIII.

draw on different premises and procedures. The former will be generically linked to the field of *Kulturgeschichte* whereas the latter will definitely become the epicenter of the *Kunstgeschichte*. Between these two fields, Schlosser will locate the *Kunstliteratur* a potential interpretive bridge, because it deals both with contextual and individual problems, trying to answer to linguistic as much as to stylistic questions: a literary source will be considered, indeed, in Schlosser's pages as the carrier of personal thoughts as much as the container of interpersonal ideas and conditions.

Nevertheless, the radical separation between *language* and *style* (with its deep roots in the semantic spectrum of the Romantic 'genius') will eventually produce a methodological paralysis in *Die Kunstliteratur*. In these pages, in fact, Schlosser will loudly reaffirm the inexorable distance between the individual character of the 'style' and the collective sedimentation of the 'language' as established by Croce: 'art is intuition and intuition is individuality, and individuality does not repeat itself'<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, Schlosser will compare the artist—the 'great master'—to an island in an essay written in 1935, and significantly titled 'The History of Style and the History of Language in the Visual Arts':

What is then a 'history of style', what it is not and what could it be? What really matters here is the biography, which means the interior (not external) history of the creative monad, 'similar to an island' (*Inselhaftigkeit*) [...] a monad that, unlike the one described by Leibniz, has large doors and windows opened towards the surrounding world, [the same world] that it transforms into lights and sounds; what really matters then is the style in the truest and most genuine sense of the word, the interior essence of the monad, its development, and not the empirical person usually indicated under a specific name, nor his cultural background.<sup>11</sup>

A quite emblematic example of such a radical distinction between the triadic antipodes of art-genius-island and culture-mass-world had been already offered previously by Croce in his monograph on the Renaissance poet Ludovico Ariosto, published in 1917. In order to 'aesthetically' understand the unrepeatable genesis of *Orlando Furioso*, Croce argues that the role played by the historical context (a matter that should interest the 'history of language') will be sure enough limited to the very use of Italian as an idiom commonly adopted by any man or woman living in sixteenth-century Ferrara in conformity with a well-established lexicon and grammar. On the other hand, this raw material—the Italian as a shared language—will not be mechanically adopted by Ariosto but profoundly sublimated and transformed

<sup>10</sup> 'l'arte è intuizione, e l'intuizione è individualità, e l'individualità non si ripete', in B. Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale. Teoria e storia*, Milano: Remo Sandron, 1902, 171. On the intuition's 'unrepeatable' character, Croce asserts: 'Nel fatto estetico non si hanno se non parole proprie; e una stessa intuizione non si può esprimere se non in un sol modo, appunto perché è intuizione e non concetto', in Croce, *Estetica*, 92. On the impossibility of translating the intuition into words, the philosopher writes: 'Corollario di ciò è l'impossibilità delle traduzioni, in quanto abbiano la pretesa di compiere il travasamento di un'espressione in un'altra, come di un liquido da un vaso in un altro di diversa forma. Si può elaborare logicamente ciò che prima era stato elaborato in forma estetica, ma non ridurre ciò che ha avuto già la sua forma estetica ad altra forma anche estetica', in Croce, *Estetica*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> J. von Schlosser, *Storia dello stile e storia del linguaggio delle arti figurative. Sguardo retrospettivo* in Schlosser, *La storia*, 189.

by means of a 'poetic' strategy, thanks to a personal inspiration and a highly-individualized talent (elements pertaining to the 'history of style').

The example of Ariosto demonstrates clearly that for Croce it would be unthinkable to try and explain the emergence of a 'style' using a purely contextual, historical method of analysis. Something quite similar can also be noticed in Schlosser's pages. In fact, the rigid boundaries established between the creative space of the artist (i.e. the individual features of the *style*) and the system of rules, norms and features diffused in a context (i.e. the prescriptive character of the *language*) appears punctually assimilated by Schlosser in several pages. In *Die Kunstliteratur*, for instance, in an evident echo of Croce's premises, the art historian reaffirms the distance that separates the territory of the *Kulturgeschichte*, as it had been developed amid the School of Vienna by scholars such as Alois Riegl and Anton Dvóřak, from his conception of *Kunstgeschichte*, based on the idealistic interpretation of art as an essentially individual activity, a personal exercise of synthesis and poetic transfiguration. If the principal pole of attraction for a historian of the culture will undoubtedly be the presence, in every work of art, of elements belong to the material context in which the work has been made, then, on the other hand, an art historian would rather pay attention to the examination of forms, shapes and signs 'invented' by the artist, in the attempt to delineate an individually-centered reconstruction of the creative process. The main target of the 'history of style' (*Kunstgeschichte*) will therefore have nothing—*idealistically nothing*—to do with the targets pursued by the 'history of language' (*Kulturgeschichte*).

In adopting such a sharp distinction between art and culture, style and language, Schlosser clearly had in mind a precise methodological ideal, which has been defined as 'unreachable' by his friend and biographer, Otto Kurz<sup>12</sup>. Since a master's style should be investigated in its constitutive individuality, as the result of an irreversible palingenesis, the primary task of *Die Kunstliteratur* must focus on establishing a solid grid of theoretical references within which to elucidate the possible range of interactions between *style* and *language* in the making of a work of art. Coherently following this premise, Schlosser considers at first the chain of intentional links that defines the intuitive process as an itinerary of separation (or 'purification') from the general norms of the 'language' towards the brightest uniqueness of an artistic invention, the 'style': a process that paradoxically could not be *re-evoked* in its 'superior,' insular dimension but only de-structured to grasp the preliminary moments, the interpersonal conditions that led to the creation of a work of art. These are the moments and aspects that a scholar should analyze by returning systematically to the use of textual sources.

Once established that the quotient of 'beauty' is intrinsically related to the 'individual' style of an artist, and that the style has been created through a process not translatable into words, Schlosser's principal task will be to provide the reader with as much information as possible about the general territory of language in which the poetic speech of art had been raised. Given the fact that the 'artistic center'

<sup>12</sup> 'Egli si era prefisso un ideale irraggiungibile. Tutti gli ideali sono irraggiungibili, ma quello di Schlosser era al di là di ogni possibilità di avvicinamento. L'opera d'arte individuale doveva essere descritta in tutta la sua unicità, senza nessun riferimento alle opere d'arte che l'avevano preceduta, né a quelle che ad essa si riferiscono. Bisognava discutere un'opera d'arte senza introdurre argomenti extra-artistici, senza fare accenno agli elementi che aveva in comune con le altre opere d'arte del suo tempo,' Kurz, *Julius*, XXXII.

of any aesthetic creation—the island of *style*—will necessarily remain out of reach to any spectator in its deepest ‘individual’ essence, the only thing that a scholar would be able to do is describe, by means of exclusion and gradual approach, what *is not* art. Put another way, in the perspective of Croce’s philosophical Idealism and Schlosser’s methodological readjustment, one cannot talk about art; one can only talk about what *is not* art.

For this reason, the exegetic method formulated by Schlosser had been called ‘concentric’ by Otto Kurz, who has pointed out the ambiguities of Schlosser’s hermeneutics and showed quite clearly how it tended to develop itself ‘*per via di levare*,’ borrowing this well-known expression from the pages of Lorenzo Ghiberti’s *Commentarii*, one of Schlosser’s greatest passions as a Renaissance scholar. In other words, in proceeding from the known to the unknown, from the conventional *language* (definable in normative terms) to the highly individual character of the *style* (inevitably ‘unreachable’ in its quotient of uniqueness), Schlosser’s analysis will tend to circumscribe gradually the degree of indetermination of art, going deep into the concentric meanders of a research that leads to the identification of all extra-aesthetic qualities to be found in a work of art. Only in this way, eliminating progressively during the examination of a work every element that it has in common with other works originated in the same context, will it be possible to the scholar to have at least an *intuition*—but never a logical comprehension—of the truest essence of an artistic *expression*: something that is unrepeatable, *ex definitio*, and therefore only partially understandable by means of a linguistic analysis.

The historiography of art, as an auxiliary discipline of the history of art, will provide via textual sources all information that a scholar needs to know in order to build a better understanding of the context in which a work of art has been formulated. Then he will be able to describe quite precisely what, in a specific work of art, create the general system of ‘language’ against which the synthetic glow of the ‘style’ will immediately shine: a quality, an essence, a distinctive *quid* that remains logically unreachable yet poetically recognizable; a value, a concept, a notion that could be only mentally and emotionally evoked, but never defined in rational terms. This paradox has been brilliantly recalled by Edgar Allan Poe in the tale, *The Island of the Fay*, in pages charged with bitter irony in which the author asks: ‘What flippant Frenchman was it who said in allusion to the well-known work of Zimmerman, that, ‘*la solitude est une belle chose; mais il faut quelqu’un pour vous dire que la solitude est une belle chose*?’<sup>13</sup>. Only the ‘language’ will be able to describe the unspeakable boundaries of the ‘style.’

### **The language of uniqueness: Schlosser and Vossler**

An important source to our understanding of the particular spectrum of critical connotations conveyed by the concepts of *style* and *language* in Schlosser’s *Kunstliteratur* is provided by Karl Vossler’s linguistic researches, and more precisely by two among his most complex scholarly contributions: *Positivismus und Idealismus in der Sprachwissenschaft* (‘Positivism and Idealism in the Science of the language’)

<sup>13</sup> E. A. Poe, *Complete Tales & Poems*, New Jersey: Castle Books, 2001, 228.

and *Sprache als Schpfung und Entwicklung* ('Language as Creation and Evolution')<sup>14</sup>. Schlosser's admiration for Vossler was loudly celebrated in the very choice of dedicating *Die Kunstliteratur* to his colleague, friend and mentor, in a moving page in which he has not neglected to mention their 'great common friend, Benedetto Croce.'

In fact, the profound influence of Croce's *Estetica* is also clearly noticeable in Vossler's researches. Along with the philosopher's premise according to which the poetry should be considered 'the motherly language of humankind' (*la lingua materna del genere umano*), Vossler asserts, just two years after the first edition of the *Estetica*, that 'every mean of expression, before becoming a set of conventions or a syntax, had been many times and for so long something quite individual and stylistic in its features'<sup>15</sup>. Not by accident, Vossler will systematically emphasize in his studies the preeminence of the *style*, as an individual formulation, over the *language*, considered as a collective container in which one can find, under the form of a general set of rules and shapes, all historical sedimentations of previously personal intuitions (something that Schlosser would have referred to as 'historical grammar'). Originated from poetry, the words will crystallize themselves into the shared structures of the language, eventually becoming only a portion within a wider normative system. In this way, one establishes a fundamental distinction between *style* and *convention* regarding their specific aesthetic aims: even though Vossler sustains the individual origins of all poetic creations, stressing consequently their character unique and unrepeatable, he refuses nevertheless to adopt any sort of intertextual parameter of judgment, asserting, on the contrary, the necessity of comparing exclusively a work of art with 'the work itself' during the process of interpretation. A central question immediately arises from this postulate: if each work is to be aesthetically evaluated in accordance with its own self-contained rules of appreciation, how could one possibly describe the features displayed by a certain work looking exclusively from its *inside*-history? If the aesthetic qualities embodied by a work are really new, individual, insular, how could one possibly have access to it? How could one understand any neologism without referring to the original linguistic system that created it?

To answer to these questions one should look once again at Croce's meditations. They state, as it has been seen, that to any *intuition* corresponds a single *expression*. The analytical process of examination of such an expression in its physical, concrete manifestation—i.e. the work of art itself—will assume inevitably the configuration of an integral *tautology*. Given that the aesthetic contemplation of a work of art is supposed to provide an idealistically *identical* reproduction of the creative process from which it has been originated, the spectator's principal task will be limited to a *symmetrical* re-evocation of the intuitive thoughts that led to the appearance of that very work. In other words, the spectator has to follow, even after centuries of separation, the same lines and boundaries that had previously guided the master during the *unrepeatable* act of creation. On the other hand, given that any work of art is believed to contain, in the perspective of Croce's Idealism, its own laws

<sup>14</sup> On Karl Vossler, see De Mambro, *Opera*, p. 172. See also the letters exchanged by Vossler and Croce in E. C. Rëndina (ed.), *Carteggio Croce-Vossler 1899-1949*, Naples, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> K. Vossler, *Positivismus und Idealismus in der Sprachwissenschaft*, Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1904; trans. *Positivismo e Idealismo nella scienza del linguaggio*, Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1908, 28.

of formulation—and therefore its own parameters of judgment—the very concept of *style* will inevitably preclude any serious attempt of transforming ‘individual’ features into portions of a stable set of norms and rules. In fact, if one develops the postulates discussed so far to their most extreme hermeneutical consequences, one will necessarily conclude that the highest degree of individuality in a work of art—its supreme quotient of artistic creativity—coincides with the unlimited creation of neologisms. Refractory by definition to any process of stabilization, neologisms tend to challenge their own intelligibility, their very possibility of being transmitted and becoming part of a generally shared set of grammatical, semantic, syntactic conventions. Anyone who has ever tried to explore the fascinating verbal caves disseminated by James Joyce all over the pages of *Finnegans Wake* can easily understand the difficulties of a rigorous adoption of Croce’s and Vossler’s premises. Since the notion of *style* is to be intended as an evident signal of the uniqueness of a form, its ‘comprehension’ will only be possible in an exquisitely aesthetic dimension, as a personal experience, and not as a critical interpretation based on logical concepts or rational tools.

Paradoxically, according to Croce, Vossler and Schlosser, the analysis of a work of art should not start from the investigation of the truly individual elements present in it, but, on the contrary, should more conveniently begin from the field of conventions—from its general features—in order to circumscribe all *extra-artistic* elements contained by an *artistic* creation. The spectator is expected to explore backwards the chain of aesthetic transformations backwards, as it were, through a sequence in which the personal codifications of the *style* have been redefined and more securely arranged within the common territory of *language*. The critical investigation will perform therefore an essentially didactic function, thanks to which the spectator will have the opportunity to perform a personal *re-evocation* of the stylistic inventions carried out by a master. Needless to say, this process of symbiosis between artist and spectator could only be attained by means of an idealistically symmetrical exchange, in which the language, intended firstly as *creation*, would be able to reveal the individual character of the intuitions and, secondly interpreted as *evolution*, would display a more prescriptive, normative role.

For this reason, the critique based on idealistic principles will appear split in two, on the edge of an epistemological dichotomy, for it will present itself, on the one hand, as a *stylistic* investigation through which the language will be considered, in Vossler’s sentences, ‘as both an individual and an artistic theoretical creation,’ and, on the other hand, it will strategically start not from the definition of individual features, but instead from the examination of their ‘historical grammar’ in the attempt of grasping the symptoms of a cultural uniformity. It should be taken into account, however, that, in an idealistic perspective, even if the *material* of a poetic construction is inevitably linked to its own context, its *forms* are considered the result of a totally subjective creation. In accordance with these assumptions, the main goal of a stylistic or formal analysis will be defining and describing, in a sort of lyrical *ekphrasis*, all the *unexpressed intentional connections* that exist behind the surface of a work, as its deepest essence. In other words, the scholar, as much as any other spectator, should start his or her examination from the general field of conventions and gradually approach the unreachable realm of the style, proceeding from a global conception of language as *evolution*—similar to Schlosser’s ‘history of language’—to

the definition of language as *creation* – comparable to Schlosser's 'history of style' – in order to evoke the intrinsic yet unspeakable *artistic* quality of a work, and delineating at the same time the *creative personality* of its master.

Vossler's influence over Schlosser is noticeable not only in the pages of *Die Kunstliteratur*, but also in the chapters of *Die Kunst des Mittelalters* ('The Art of the Middle Ages'), published in Vienna in 1923, a year that connects two important events in Schlosser's career: the obtainment, in 1922, of a permanent position in art history at the University of Vienna, and the publication, in 1924, of the monumental *Kunstliteratur*. In the introduction of *Die Kunst des Mittelalters*, Schlosser echoes quite incisively both Croce's and Vossler's ideas:

Art, like language, should be considered, for specific scientific or practical goals, from a different point of view than creativity: for instance, from the point of view of the *evolution*, just to mention this expression that could be easily misinterpreted. If one subtracts from the components and contents of art – i.e. from what there is in it that has been individually determined and created – one should consider art as the sum of what shall remain, something that, in certain historical periods, seem to be common among all the works of expression, the good ones as much as the mediocre or bad ones, the original ones as much as the one which are fruits of imitation.<sup>16</sup>

Schlosser's definition of art as 'the sum of what shall remain' at the end of an analytical process recalls unequivocally the already mentioned notion of 'historical grammar,' and more incisively Vossler's conception of language as *evolution* and *creation*. In fact, in the introduction of *Die Kunst des Mittelalters*, the author emphasizes that in order

to understand the language of an artwork, of any art, one must have learned its language before, and this can happen through the grammar, with or without a historical frame, for the grammar does not refer to a concrete individual [being or work] but to a general abstraction, which is obtained through a conventional procedure after the concrete individual [being or work].<sup>17</sup>

The comprehension of an artwork is therefore possible only by means of a continue process of exclusion (*'per via di levare'*). This process leads from the general toward the particular, thanks to the adoption of a selective method of investigation that one may call a 'concentric critique.' This procedure, or 'critique,' proclaims as its most distinguished hermeneutical strategies the production of gradual circumscriptions and progressive delimitations of (what should be pointed out as) *non-artistic* elements present in a work. While these circles of analysis fail to touch the 'deepest aesthetic center' of a work (which is unreachable by definition), they could nevertheless indicate quite clearly the presence of formulaic, generic – and therefore

<sup>16</sup> Schlosser, *L'arte*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Schlosser, *L'arte*, 4.

*non-artistic*–components within the individual artwork, which are permanently isolated and insular in the world of creation.

Comparable indeed to an island enclosed in itself, an isolated fortress surrounded by the sea, the aesthetic value of a work of art will appear, in the meditations of Croce, Vossler and Schlosser, as the unrepeatability of a monadic experience rather than the product of a dialogical exchange between context and artist, culture and art, language and style. Accordingly, the scholars who will devote themselves to the analysis of any artwork should try and link first of all the specific features of a personal system of shapes (i.e. the work of art as such) to its specific territory of formation (i.e. the historical context), gathering all available information concerning this work in the attempt of establishing a general grid of reference. In other words, what is important here is the action of framing all linguistic conditions under which a work of art has been produced in order to idealistically evoke what otherwise could not be said, namely the quotient of ‘aesthetic insularity’ of an artistic creation. Paradoxical as it may appear, from Croce’s, Vossler’s and Schlosser’s perspectives, no one, except the artist himself in the very moment of creation, is fully able to experience the creative process as an individual *intuition*. Scholars, critics, and spectators shall only tentatively *re-evolve* the poetic formulation of an artwork by means of an ekphrastic description of it, in order to establish a mirror-like symmetry between their interpretive methods and the artist’s personal operations. For this reason, the most exemplary model of art historical writing according to Schlosser will be represented by poems, since the primary goal of the critique is provide a verbal recollection of a ‘poetic’ work, producing an accurate tautology: the concentric return to what cannot be really grasped.

Indeed, Schlosser seemed to have found in Roberto Longhi’s elegant and sophisticated prose a perfect example of lyrical yet critically based art historical mode of writing. Schlosser admired intensely the Italian’s pages for their remarkable ability in translating by means of verbal expressions the pictorial qualities previously observed on the surface of the works. More than mere descriptions, however, Longhi’s sentences appear to the Viennese as poetic distillations, phonetic transfigurations of personal experiences of contemplation. It suffices to read this paragraph of Longhi’s monograph on Piero della Francesca to fully understand what might have so strongly attracted Schlosser’s attention:

*Una geniale lucidezza fu concessa a Piero nello scrutinio ch’egli andava conducendo dei fatti d’arte qui appena lumeggiati. Egli indagava cautamente, ad esempio, i possibili rapporti che gli educati ritmi formali dei classicisti avrebbero potuto intrattenere, se sottoposti ad una qualche riforma, con la preventiva naturalezza del mondo di Masaccio; ma, accorto egualmente della profonda lezione racchiusa nella fatale agrimensura del mondo creata da Paolo Uccello, innamorato ad un tempo della trasfigurata naturalezza del lume di Domenico, interessato alle dislocate larghezze cromatiche di Masolino, ma anche ai piu puntuali e preziosi grani di pittura, attento persino alle nuove insistenze lineari, andava alla fine in cerca di un’arte che*

*poeticamente sublimasse tutti quegli impulsi in un universale rigorosamente sintattico e pure ampiamente corale.*<sup>18</sup>

Longhi's expressions combine in a sensual interplay of equivalences between word and image in the attempt of critically defining the stylistic features of Piero's oeuvre, getting closer and closer to the very essence—*that* unspeakable and unreachable essence—of his 'artistic personality': an essence that renders so unique, insular and yet immediately recognizable the creative *intuitions* developed by the master of Borgo San Sepolcro. Moreover, Longhi's lyrical description provides a quite personal method of critique (as 'personal' as a true artistic creation!) and offers also a highly-individualized lexicon for the examination of aesthetic phenomena, redirecting the sphere of art criticism towards an exquisitely literary and periphrastic dimension. Due to the fact that the aesthetic qualities of a work of art are intrinsically incorporated within its material structure—according to Croce's symmetry of *intuition* and *expression*—such a work could not assume *any other form*, except that already established by the artist. For this reason, the critical investigation will need to adopt a 'descriptive' vocabulary arranged in an intentionally 'poetic' mode of expression, in the attempt of analyzing the artistic object from all its sides building a dynamic chain of 'concentric circles.' Inch by inch, along a laborious journey of observation and analysis, this chain of 'concentric circles' will eventually define all components incorporated in a work that derive directly from the set of conventions, norms or rules diffused in a certain context, framing thus its 'historical grammar' and isolating by extension the paradigm of 'style' from all 'linguistic' contaminations. The work of art will appear then in all its magnificent insularity, detached in its aesthetic purity from any element that was not created during the idealistic fusion of *intuition* and *expression*, but was on the contrary the fruit of a mechanical inertia. 'What shall remain' after so long a process of critical investigation will be fully appreciated as the evident manifestation of a truly personal invention, now observable in its—otherwise untranslatable—'aesthetic insularity.' Piero, master of the Renaissance, appears then in all his stylistic individuality.

It cannot be the fruit of a mere coincidence therefore if the strongest influence of Croce and Vossler will programmatically appear in an essay written by Schlosser and dedicated (quite appropriately!) to Piero della Francesca: first published in 1929 as an article for the *Sitzunberichte der wiener Akademie*, the text will be later on

<sup>18</sup> 'A genial lucidity has been granted to Piero in the selection that he was undertaking of the facts of art so far described. He had, for instance, cautiously investigated the possible relations that the educated formal rhythms of the classicists could have entertained, if subjected to certain changes, with the preventive naturalness of Masaccio's world; but, captured by the profound lesson enclosed in the fatal measurement of the world created by Paolo Uccello, equally in love with the transfigured naturalness of Domenico's lights, interested in Masolino's displaced chromatic widths, and also in others more punctual and precious pictorial seeds, attentive even to the new linear insistence, he seemed to be in fact searching for an art that could have poetically sublimated all those impulses [transforming them] in an universe rigorously syntactic and yet widely choral' (free translation by R de MS) in R. Longhi, *Piero della Francesca*, Rome: Valori Plastici, 1927, reprinted in R. Longhi, *Da Cimabue a Morandi. Saggi di storia della pittura italiana*, Milan: Mondadori Editore, 1982, 368. On Longhi's ekphrastic method, see A. Chastel, *Roberto Longhi: il genio dell'ekphrasis* in G. Previtali (ed.), *L'arte di scrivere sull'arte. Roberto Longhi nella cultura del nostro tempo*, Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1982, 56-65; and also G. Patrizi, *La 'lettura' dell'arte* in F. Zeri (ed.), *Storia dell'arte italiana. III. Conservazione, falso, restauro*. Turin: Einaudi Editore, 1981, 199-276.

reprinted in 1938, with few modifications, as a chapter within the Italian volume *Xenia. Saggi sulla storia dello stile e del linguaggio nell'arte figurativa* ('Xenia. Essays on the History of Style and Language in the Visual Arts'). Examined both as an intellectual and an artist, and considered as a 'touchstone for the artistic understanding', Piero represents to Schlosser a paradigmatic example of the Renaissance dichotomy between theoretical meditation and practical activity. According to the Viennese, indeed, these moments are subordinated to two different fields of knowledge, each one ruled by specific set of concepts: the former logical and the latter poetical. From this perspective, what characterizes an artist will not be his or her capacity to explain personal methods undertaken but, on the contrary, the very possibility of creating something new, without even knowing why, but definitely knowing how. All long this metamorphic process, as Schlosser states, 'the rough matter provided by thought now fully embodied (*inverato*) in the artistic intuition, destroyed as raw material and fused in the fire of fantasy, comes out without waste, straight off, as an *artistic expression*'<sup>19</sup>.

In the case of Piero, his documented relations with Masolino, Masaccio, Paolo Uccello and Domenico Veneziano should be listed among the many items that belong to the 'history of language', that is to say, the body of interpersonal techniques, instruments, and manners that had generally characterized the art in Florence during the first half of the fifteenth century. On the contrary, a serious investigation addressed to the understanding of Piero's personal working methods, examined in their intrinsic 'insularity' (*Inselhaftigkeit*), should be the main target of the 'history of style'. However, even the more analytical 'history of style' will not be fully able to decipher in an exhaustive way the complex quotient of creativity embodied by a work of art. Style, as the truly individual quality, could not be translated into any other form or language besides the one already adopted by the artist in the moment of creation. For this reason, Schlosser will conclude that scholars must limit their contributions to the making of evocative descriptions of the constitutive features of a work of art. But since every *intuition* will correspond to a unique form of *expression*, its critical analysis will inevitably take the shape of a literal, tautological *re-evocation* of its most distinguishable forms. In the example of Piero, the study of his creations will start quite eloquently from the examination of the contextual components present in his works, for as Schlosser asserts: 'As any other artist, Piero is rooted into his own time and land; he has to be considered on this background, if we want to recall his person flesh and blood in front of us'<sup>20</sup>. After having adequately framed what is general and prosaic in Piero's works, one should try and define his 'creative personality'. *This* should be the main goal of a history of art conceived as a 'history of style':

It is clear, [Schlosser affirms, that] it is the side of the 'history of the spirit', of the 'history of language' of a phenomenon that should be surpassed and overtaken. Here in fact begins the real authentic problem of the history of art, whose proper object is the personality of the artist, his or her interior 'lyric'.

<sup>19</sup> J. von Schlosser, *L'artista completo: Piero della Francesca* in J. von Schlosser, *Xenia. Saggi sulla storia dello stile e del linguaggio nell'arte figurativa*, Bari: G. Laterza, 1938, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Schlosser, *L'artista*, 63.

Here begins that sort of 'critique' which is no longer the fundamental (necessary) 'textual critique,' but more precisely a historical critique in the deepest sense of the word, whose *Organon* is the separation between art and non-art: the moment in which is decided where falls the gravity center of a problem, whether it makes or not part of the aesthetic field.<sup>21</sup>

Based on Croce's philosophical principles and Vossler's linguistic premises, *Die Kunstliteratur* present itself as a methodological diaphragm, a field of research paradoxically concerned with the historical definition of what is *not* art, in the hope of building a hermeneutical bridge between the process of creation and its wide open territory of critical explanations. In the concrete development of Schlosser's studies, the concept of *style* will always remain beyond the horizon of logical investigations and will assume instead the shape of a vanishing island, unreachable and ideal, understandable only by means of a personal *re-evocation*. The *language*, on the opposite, will present itself as an immediately accessible territory for any scientific examination. Chained by what may be called an 'oxymoronic method,' Schlosser will finish considering the quotient of individuality conveyed by the notion of *style* as the deepest yet unspeakable touch of truth in art, so absolute and pure a value that it shall inevitably remain far away from any analytical reconstruction. One could expect to grasp it—or at least to have a glowing intuition of *what cannot be specifically explained* about art (that is to say, the sphere of *style*)—by means of a systematic and concentric process of progressive exclusions in order to define *what can be generally said* about art (namely, the conventional realm of *language*). Closed in its insularity, the style will be definable only *in negativo*: confronting the works done by great masters with their specific horizons of references, one should be able to understand all phenomena that—strange as it may sound—*do not belong* to the authentic field of art. In order to grasp the ineffable *légèreté* of Poetry, or to feel the immanent transparency of Beauty one has to identify, first of all, the pragmatic strategies of the prose, the common manifestations of what is obvious, generic, predetermined. To watch the celestial bodies, one has to look at the wide huge sky, for, as Emanuele Tesauro says, 'stars shine in the darkness'.

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<sup>21</sup> Schlosser, *L'artista*, 63.