

Benedetto Croce

A Theory of the *Macchia*¹

Translated from Italian by Ricardo De Mambro Santos

Few people know a little book by Vittorio Imbriani, *The Promoting Scene (La quinta promotrice, Naples, 1869)*, a series of letters addressed to the Sicilian painter and engraver Saro Cucinotta regarding the exhibition of the Society of Fine Arts in Naples in 1867-68. Like all writings by Imbriani, it is a very pleasant book, filled with satirical divagations, historical and literary curiosities, as well as bizarre remarks; but it has also another particular relevance for displaying the effects of the renovation in the general aesthetic criteria promoted by De Sanctis, and the revolution in painting against the academicism operated in Southern Italy by that spirit of humble realism that was Filippo Palizzi, and by that passionate, meditative, and dreamy soul of Domenico Morelli. As a student of De Sanctis in Zurich and a very good friend of Palizzi, Imbriani lived among the young artists of Naples, sharing their vivid debates in those years of fervour and great hope.

In these pages of art criticism, he took position against the 'ideomania', that is, against the idea that a painting must be charged with philosophical, moral, and satirical intentions, which has penetrated also in Italy from France and Germany. In that regard, he recalls what Palizzi – the 'glorious *ciucciario*' or painter of donkeys – had done in the attempt to call back the youth toward the study of reality and form, preaching that the subject matter is irrelevant if it's rendered with full clarity and evidence, and that those said ideas are just superstition and affectation, and that painting consists only in feeling and execution. When Domenico Morelli, traveling across Germany, had seen the learned frescoes of Kaulbach on the walls of the stairs of the new museum in Berlin, he remained cold. 'It seems to me (he has written in certain pages of his memories) that, without knowing the German language, I could not read those thoughts as they had been expressed in those forms'. The frescoes by Kaulbach are mentioned also by Imbriani with a vivid feeling of dislike, because (he says) 'all the poetry they aim to fetch is not enough to please the eye'.

When talking about historical painting, Imbriani employs again only few words. There is no distinction between historical painting or genre painting; the

¹ Benedetto Croce, *Una teoria della 'macchia'* (1905), in Id., *Problemi di estetica e contributi alla storia dell'estetica italiana*. Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1940 (3rd revised edition), 241-251.

historical painting is also a genre painting, one could argue; one thing is the title and another the reality of a painting. A painting displayed in the 1867-68 exhibition was entitled *The Convalescence of Knight Baiardo* but, in the reality, it was nothing else but a pompous Southerner pictorial fantasy. The painting portrayed with great dexterity a room paved with a marble floor, filled with rich carpets and luxurious furniture and textiles, in which, on a golden and crimson armchair, lied the so-called Baiardo, leaning his head on a yellow pillow, wearing a purple corsage and a shoulder bag to hold the wounded arm, with his knees covered under a richly decorated carpet. Next to him, a young girl was seated, seen from behind, wearing a green and golden dress, in the act of reading a psalter, while, deeper in the back, two other women – one dressed in brown and another in purple – were singing and looking at a book. ‘And Ciccio Chiariello, the medal-holder seller of textiles, who provides canvases to all painters of Naples, appeared transvestite as a rich Italian gentleman of the time, looking at the scene, pensively, the head leaning on his fist’.

In this way, Imbriani used to look at and interpret paintings: sometimes, truth be told, with a tone of criticism that recalled the atmosphere of a studio, which was, however, a good reaction against the ordinary forms of art criticism, which reduced paintings to little literary narratives and tended to forget everything about lights, shadows, and colours. For instance, Imbriani has learned from the artists to despise ‘knowledgeable’ people and art ‘lovers’ who had never penetrated, however, the intimate hidden depths of the artistic creation and didn’t know how to follow with their gaze what a painter or a sculptor were properly seeking. Moreover, our critic gives almost always proof of a high artistic sense, as one can see from what he says about Morelli’s paintings, who amazed the audience back then with his productive temper, his insatiable research of pictorial motifs, and his works, which looked like sketches, even though they were completely finished, because they said everything he intended to say. Here is how Imbriani felt and described the *Deposition of Christ*:

A night scene: mysterious figures watch a funeral rite; women prostrated in pain, arranged in a hemicycle around the corpse; men standing still, contemplating and reflecting upon the accomplished sacrifice as if waiting for something supernatural come out from that dead body, which was wrapped in myrrh-scented and ointment-perfumed linen. The moon shines out with grandeur from behind the brownish hills, on which stick out the black silhouette of two crosses still raised. The blood-coloured light of the burning torches, held by some figures in the foreground, blends itself with the pale rays of the moon, colouring of peace and pain the faces of the son and the mother. Where are the faces of the other Marys? Hidden under the linen. How much else out of this mute eloquence of pain is hidden from the eyes? How do the figures lie down, how do they sit? Don’t ask me: pain has no pose. Don’t you recognize the apostles, or the Magdalenes, or the poor followers of Christ’s word, who were cursed, isolated, mocked? In the

silence of the night, that group of people seems to be waiting for the last word, the last comfort out of the corpse's lips. What a profound silence! One can almost hear the crackling sound of the torches mixed with the sighs getting lost in the blows of the nocturne breeze. A shiver runs through my bones and shakes me for as long as I stay in front of that canvas, stirring all the story of that great man in me.

Only sketched?

Morelli's profound impression, complete, entire, without anything getting lost, is transmitted to me by means of a simple *macchia* [stain]; and this is the force of logical execution. A five-fingered hand, a head, a fold, a more circumscribed figure would have been the denial of that painting. It is the whole scene, its undefined quality, that communicates the great force of feeling: one can feel the paint but not see it, the tears can be guessed without being shown, and, above all, the hour and the moment are the mystery that envelops figures and lands, pain and cry.

Truth be told, while reading this little book by Imbriani, I was stunned that such a direction in the critique of the Fine Arts had not been further pursued and brought to perfection but have vanished instead, without leaving any trace or memory. The author himself didn't seem to be fully conscious of the importance of what he had accomplished since he hasn't done any art criticism later on, devoting himself to the speculations of an eccentric erudition. This was for sure a healthier method [of critique] than the ones currently applied in Italy: on the one hand, a 'fashionable' form of criticism [*critica modistica*], which talks about painting and sculpture as if it were talking about culinary, depending on how provocative and more or less new the effects of the art might appear; or, on the other hand, a kind of criticism that could be called 'inflated' [*di montatura*] for it is only interested in seeking for and magnifying symbols and analogies, which is now mocked by charlatan painters and sculptors or, with their complicity, mocks the good people.

Nevertheless, Imbriani, who possessed a philosophical culture and mind, didn't limit himself to operate a form of criticism in the way we have pointed out, but attempted also to formulate a theory of it. Under the aegis of Hegelian ideas, he had already sustained, in a letter on *Bernardo Celentano* (1864), that painting should represent the Idea; however, the practice of art and meditation has shown very soon the falsity of that theory, which was definitely refused and denied in the little book we are examining. Should one still claim that painting must portray the Idea, this concept should be understood (he says) as a Pictorial Idea. But what is a pictorial idea? It is (he adds) the *macchia*.

Once, a painter showed him an illustrated book; noticing his dissatisfaction towards the mediocre drawings and photographs printed on it, he indicated as the best element of the volume a fly squashed between two pages: so beautifully

squashed that it was already the whole idea of a painting. In Palizzi's studio, among the various paintings and sketches, it used to hang on a wall a small cardboard, splendidly framed, made out of four or five brushstrokes: 'those few brushstrokes didn't represent anything determined but they were so happily in tune that no other painting in those two rooms could equal them, no matter how perfect in their forms and interesting their subjects might have been: that harmony of colours moved everyone to lively joy', awakening in the fantasy similar images. A fragment of an African marble column, which was for sale in Naples on via Costantinopoli, had such veins that, every time Imbriani stopped by and looked at them, they produced the same feeling, the same kind of images: a group of beautiful naked women, as modest and fearful as if they were represented in certain fables and certain episodes of chivalric poems: 'never a dressed image, never a virile image, never an image of lascivious nudity'.

What is then the *macchia*, reduced to the last expression? A harmony of tones, that is, of shadows and light able to resurrect in the soul all sorts of feelings, inflaming the fantasy to the point of becoming productive. And the *macchia* is the *sine qua non* of the painting, its indispensable essence, which may sometimes lead one to forget any other absent quality and cannot be substituted by any. The *macchia* is the pictorial idea as much as the musical idea consists of a given harmony of sounds that the master transforms into a motif. And in the same way it is required from the depth of the longest, richest and most various music score a central motif around which everything may organically unfold and derive, likewise, from the depth of the most immeasurable painting, be it as vast as Michelangelo's *Judgement*, it is necessary a certain harmony of light and shadows from which it takes its character. And this harmony of light and shadows, this *macchia*, is what truly moves the beholder; it is not, as ordinary people may think, the expression of the figures or the sterile materiality of the naked subject. Similarly, in music, it is not the imposed words, or the libretto, or the character of the melody that produce the emotion in the spectators, bringing them to tears, accelerating the pace, filling with *furore*, moving one to dance, and calming down the exalted ones.

This is not to say that the *macchia*, without which no painting is possible, makes the whole painting. The squashed fly, the four or five brushstrokes on the cardboard, the veins in the fragment of the African marble contain the harmony of colours that a painting must possess, and suggest them to the fantasy, but they do not constitute the painting itself: as much as the first note of a motif is not the entire music score, even though the entire music score is in fact the unfolding of that very first note. The *macchia* is, therefore,

the portrait of the first distant impression of an object or a scene; the first characteristic effect that impresses itself upon the eye of the artist, either in the case in which the artist sees the object and the scene materially, or in the

case in which the artist perceives it through the fantasy or the memory. It is the most relevant and truly distinctive in the light effect, produced by a special arrangement of people and things variably coloured. And, when I say distant, I don't mean a material distance, but a moral one, which consists of not having received yet what had been perceived in all its particulars: a kind of reception that may only occur thanks to a long understanding and loving attention.

Between that portrait of the first impression and the determined, meticulous, detailed portrait runs the entire artistic process:

The execution, the making of a painting is nothing else but a way to get closer to the object, in order to unfold and provide stable forms to what had passed before one's eyes like a glimmer. Should that first fundamental tuned harmony be missing, the execution, the finished piece – however great it might be – will never be able to move the spectators or awake any feelings, while a plain and simple *macchia*, without any determination of objects, is more than capable to provoke those feelings.

And very often a most important fact occurs. In the attempt made by a painter to get closer to what had first appeared as a *macchia*, by means of attention and execution, it may decrease sometimes part of its strength or lose it altogether:

How often are the sketches of a painting, artistically speaking, far superior to the painting itself, once it is executed, finished, and made perfect? It so happens that the first touches of any work of art reveal more powerfully the artists and their thoughts than the polished, accomplished work might do; the incorrectness itself – for which, in the first manifestation of a powerful impression, one may exceed and exaggerate the distinctive quality of it – adds efficiency to the manifestation. The execution enhances that first robust perception. Waiting often generates confusion. The *macchia* is all of the artist: it is their proper way of grasping that beauty that emerges, it is their idea, it is the subjective part of the painting, while the execution is the objective part of it, it is the subject that prevails and imposes itself. The true great artist, who may be proud of making a quintessential masterpiece, is able to reproduce every particular with illusive precision, without altering in the least or losing the expressive quality of the *macchia*.

This theory of the *macchia* so effectively exposed by Imbriani (which should be read with pleasure, since it may be considered almost novel, given the extreme rarity of the little book in which it is contained) must be, of course, purged of certain eccentricities and, more importantly, one must bear well in mind that the *macchia* is not objectively present in the things, but it is a creation of the artist, who sometimes believes to find it within the things themselves to which they have transferred it. Once this necessary admonition is made, one must recognize that such a theory

determines quite well the character for which painting is an art, instead of an allegory or a sign of ideas. Conceived as an aesthetic theory, however, it remains incomplete, unless it does not answer an ulterior question: 'Does the process described above pertain solely to the art of painting?'. It would be a mistake to give an affirmative answer.

From his side, Imbriani has asked the question and provided an affirmative answer. On the other hand, it would be too much to expect from him, in 1868, the radical destruction of what I had called 'Lessing's mistake' in regard to the limits of the arts, which has now started to being considered such. To Imbriani, therefore, the process described is distinctive of and specific to the art of painting or, to put it better, to a group of arts which include painting and music in opposition to poetry. Painting is music with colours as much as music is painting with sounds: 'These two arts are both oriented towards the feeling, and they move it, one by the harmony of light, the other by the harmony of sounds; both contain thereby a similar material element, which limit them within restricted confines: restricted, that is, in comparison to the infinite field occupied by poetry'. 'Poetry is the only art able to provide what is determined, because it is the only art oriented towards the mind and not the sense; it is, therefore, the only art that may reveal the interior of the appearances, evoked by the others: the reason behind a certain musical lament, the reason of a certain furious gesture in a sculpture, the motif behind that window, half opened, half closed, out of which the painter has achieved a mysterious light effect'. In conformity with those ideas, Imbriani has discussed the systems of classification of the arts provided by Hegel and Vischer and, more in detail, the one recently published by Antonio Tari, in which painting was set on the top of the artistic pyramid and considered superior to poetry itself.

I shall not repeat what I have written elsewhere regarding the unity of art and the incongruence of any determination of characters that lead to the constitution of the circles of the particular arts. The apodictic reasoning with which I have demonstrated that fallacy is not refutable, in my views; and it has remained irrefutable in fact, because those who have attempted to contradict me in that regard, instead of fighting against that thought, have swirled around and got lost in comparisons and metaphors, invoking Lessing's authority or complaining that, due to my critical subtlety, many beautiful lush plants from the garden of Aesthetics have been eradicated and thrown into the fire – as if a philosopher were a gardener.

It suffices to read the description offered by Imbriani of the procedures of the pictorial art to recognize at once that the very same description, without any alteration, is applicable to the poetry as well, even though someone insists in differentiating one from the other in a substantial manner. Every poet knows that the inspiration comes precisely as a *macchia*, a motif, a rhythm, a line, a psychic motion, or in any other word one may put it, in which nothing is determined and everything is determined; in which there is already that meter and not others, that word and not others, that order and not others, that length and not others, that

proportion and not others. Every poet knows that their work entails the unfolding of that *macchia*, that motif, that rhythm, in order to attain at last, fully determined, loudly recitable, written in letters, that same impression that they had had in a flash, in their first inspiration. The value of the poetry is, like that of painting, in the *macchia*, in the lyric wave, and not in the richness and relevance of thoughts or feelings, in the realistic and historical comments, or in the capacity of revealing secrets. In the *macchia*, in the rhythm, in the motif, it finds its purpose and fascination; without the *macchia*, a composition may be very skilfully made and display infinite qualities, but it shall not be considered poetry; on the other hand, whenever [the *macchia*] is there, even in the case it might present certain defects, it will be able nevertheless to impress itself upon all fantasies and souls as a work made by a poet and not by a manual worker. What am I saying, a poet? There is no writer, not even a writer of prose in general, who has not experienced that process: any writer, no matter how long they might have studied an argument and reflected upon it, cannot sit down and start writing unless those studies and reflections don't organize themselves in their brain, until they will not resound their rhythm within, emerge as the line of a body, take the colour as a *macchia*. 'I have everything in my mind (says sometimes, naively, the writer), but I don't know how to get started; the first words are still missing'. And the absence of those first words is precisely the absence of the aesthetic rhythm. Once those first words will be found, one is on the road, because everything has been found: the *macchia* has been formed and it needs only to be determined and secured.

To sum up, the *macchia* about which Imbriani has tried to build up a theory, is the very essence of the aesthetic fact, the *intuition*. It may change its name sometimes, but it never changes its nature; moreover, it does not so much change its names as it commutes and permutates them continually, so one may speak of colour in poetry, rhythm in sculpture, line in music, motif in painting, much to Herbart's dismay and to the great joy of those who, like myself, see in those ordinary ways of saying the beautiful confirmation of the inherent unity of the arts.

For this reason, it happened also to Imbriani that, while he believed to have enunciated with his theory of the *macchia* the distinctive character of a particular art, what he had enunciated instead, once again (because he could not have done otherwise), was the pure and plain character of art – of art in general.

Ricardo De Mambro Santos is the chair of the Department of Art History at Willamette University (Salem, Oregon). After having taught for many years Art Literature and Criticism at the University of Rome La Sapienza and, as a Visiting professor, at the University of Washington, Whitman College, and Tokyo International University, he currently teaches classes on Renaissance art and theory as well as seminars on early modern visual culture, together with courses on theories and methodologies of Art History. He has extensively published on

Renaissance art and culture, focusing in particular on Leonardo da Vinci, Giorgio Vasari, Karel van Mander, and Hendrick Goltzius. His interests in the field of Art Historiography have led him to explore the critical ideas and the interpretive methods of Julius von Schlosser, Lionello Venturi, and Tzvetan Todorov, as well as the philosophical legacy of Benedetto Croce. Over the years, he has curated several art exhibitions in the United States, Europe, and South America, dedicated to Federico Fellini's drawings and films, the Alessandro Maggiori collection of drawings and prints, and Northern Renaissance paintings and prints.

rdemambr@willamette.edu



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