

Gramsci, Philosophy of Language, and Aesthetic Judgment in Light of an Expanded Notion of Ideology

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This essay connects Antonio Gramsci's expanded concept of Marxian ideology to his training in linguistics and, broadly understood, philosophy of language in order to advance a hypothesis regarding Gramsci's views on literary criticism and aesthetic judgment. This hypothesis can be summed up in the following way: aesthetic judgment, including literary criticism, maintains a unity of form and content while rejecting facile attempts to reduce the global meaning of a "political" work of art to its ideological content, where ideology is understood in the sense of a series of theoretical propositions about the world, which reside in the realm of traditional Marxist superstructure. As a result, there is no recourse to either a scientific objectivity or a relativistic emphasis on subjectivity in the evaluation of works of art; instead, priority is given to an immanent, contextual interpretation of works of literature and culture. Such a methodology is intimately related to Gramsci's reworked concept of ideology and therefore deserves further consideration.

Keywords: Gramsci; Ideology; Philosophy of Language, Aesthetic Judgment.

Throughout the *Quaderni del carcere*, expanding on ideas presented in his pre-prison writings, Antonio Gramsci develops a concept of “ideology” that ties the notion to several other concepts – folklore, religion, common sense, and philosophy – in a way that reworks the received Marxian understanding of ideology most present in his contemporary moment. In doing so, he draws our attention to the power structures that undergird cultural phenomena, from the local and popular to national and international regulative concepts of high culture, in a way that places them in reciprocal relation to material and economic conditions. Such a reworking of the notion of “ideology” offers a special role to the intellectual, now understood in a more expansive sense not as the educated man of letters, but as any actor who is a conscious interlocutor in cultural, social, and political debates. Taking such an understanding as a starting point, this paper seeks to present an interpretation of the interrelation of philosophy of language and aesthetic judgment in the *Quaderni del carcere*, developed as a further iteration of Gramsci's own reading of Marx and his unique intervention in the philosophical debates surrounding the relationship between base and superstructure.

While I am not directly addressing here the subset of topics that Gramsci explicitly links to the concept of ideology, I would like to suggest that an important companion to folklore, religion, common sense, and philosophy is the broader question of aesthetic judgment and its relationship to the categories of religion and philosophy, as mediated by Gramsci's formation as a student of linguistics and philosophy of language. I maintain that we

need to delve into Gramsci's philosophical orientation, both in the traditional western sense of academic philosophy and in the more extensive sense of an everyday worldview, and the ties it has to his formative background in linguistics and his attendant understanding of literary criticism and aesthetic judgment. In working up this connection, my goal is to draw out some of the implications of the "cultural turn" in Marxist theory that Gramsci's thought represents. Therefore, this paper has two major objectives: in the first place, to develop the linkage between religion and philosophy in the expanded understanding of ideology and superstructure, and, secondly, to tie this specific concept to the possibilities of a radically new mode of engaging in aesthetic and cultural critique.

As a Marxist engaged in a critical revision of interpretations of Marx, Gramsci identifies a previously unacknowledged problem in Marxian theory: that of how, precisely, to change things as they are, given that such empirical change comes about due to the elaboration of a scientific, theoretical explanation for the economic and social order¹. Gramsci's famous philosophy of praxis is formulated in response to the interrelated problems of theoretical scientificity, the canon of nineteenth-century philosophical idealism, and practical political concerns. Thomas Nemeth has termed the specific problem that Gramsci addresses the «impasse of objectivism», which emerges from the nexus of positivism, materialism, and skepticism, in which one possible outcome is a lapse into Humean psychologism². In looking to ground one's observations of the world objectively, one must confront the issue of subjective perception and the closed loop of the privileged subject. Instead of allowing for a seemingly infinite chain of linked contingencies, Gramsci chooses to foreground an «inquiry into the possibility of objective knowledge» itself³.

Gramsci engages in a critique of any metaphysical foundation for materialism, which is the charge he levies against Engels and Bukharin,

¹ Here I am re-casting what is otherwise well-understood, by Gramsci himself as well as the scholarship, as the Gramscian focus on superstructure in Marxist theory. For a comprehensive introduction to and overview of Gramsci's relationship to Marx, see vol. 2 of MARTIN 2002. For interpretations of Gramsci's specific notion of materialism, see FINOCCHIARO 1988; FROSINI 2010; MORERA 1990; NEMETH 1980.

² NEMETH 1980, p. 104.

³ *Ibidem*.

against a proper understanding of Marx⁴. As Gramsci writes in Notebook 11:

«si chiamò materialismo ogni dottrina filosofica che escludesse la trascendenza dal dominio del pensiero e quindi in realtà tutto il panteismo e l'immanentismo non solo, ma si chiamò materialismo anche ogni atteggiamento pratico ispirato al realismo politico, che si opponesse cioè a certe correnti deteriori del romanticismo politico, come le dottrine di Mazzini popolarizzate e che non parlavano che di "missioni" e di "ideali" e di altre consimili nebulosità vaghe e astrattezze sentimentalistiche»⁵.

Under the umbrella of such a definition, «the whole of German Idealism can, thus, be called a materialism in this sense. Crude metaphysical materialism is closer to popular religions and common sense than to the philosophy of praxis»⁶.

Given that Gramsci, following Marx, argues against any transcendent order (or notion of god), what remains is the subject, invested with the ability to transform material reality based on an understanding of history, philosophy, science, and economics. The difficulty, which Gramsci outlines in the *Quaderni* entries dedicated to the rubrics of *La realtà del mondo esterno* and *L'oggettività del reale*⁷, is to avoid «la conversione del materialismo storico nell'idealismo o addirittura nella religione»⁸. This is the distinction between a

⁴ It is important to understand what Nemeth underscores: «...that early Italian Marx scholarship, at least since Croce's first writings, came down heavily against imputing a materialist world-view to Marx. This rejection of materialism, understood in the traditional metaphysical sense, stood in sharp contrast to the efforts of many Marxists elsewhere and even to Labriola himself» (NEMETH 1980, p. 98).

⁵ *QC* 11, § 16, pp. 1408-1409; «every philosophical doctrine that excludes transcendence from the realm of thought is called materialism; therefore, in reality, not just pantheism and immanentism count as materialisms, but also every practical attitude inspired by political realism, which places itself in opposition to certain second-rate forms of political romanticism, like the popularized ideas of Mazzini, and those that do not speak of 'missions' or 'ideals' and other similar, related vague concepts and sentimental abstractions» (author's own translation).

⁶ NEMETH 1980, p. 102

⁷ Those entries are the following: *QC* 4, § 1, § 37, § 41, § 43, § 47; *QC* 7, § 47; *QC* 8, § 153, § 177, § 215, § 217; *QC* 10, § 6, § 40, § 42, § 46; *QC* 11, § 17, § 20, § 34, § 37, § 57, § 60, § 65; *QC* 16, § 12; *QC* 17 § 18. For reasons of brevity and clarity, I am unable to present here an in-depth analysis of each of these notes.

⁸ *QC* 4 § 43, p. 469; «the conversion of historical materialism into idealism or even into religion» (GRAMSCI 1996, p. 193).

properly historical materialism (which is the philosophy of praxis), and a metaphysical materialism. Such an error occurs, Gramsci asserts in *QC* 4, § 41 under the heading *La scienza*, through the assumption of total objectivity separated, and abstracted, from human perception or understanding⁹. In the definition of experimental and theoretical science presented in this note, Gramsci writes:

«mi pare che sia un errore domandare alla scienza come tale la prova dell'obbiettività del reale: questa è una concezione del mondo, una filosofia, non un dato scientifico. Cosa può dare la scienza in questa direzione? La scienza fa una selezione tra le sensazioni, tra gli elementi primordiali della conoscenza: considera certe sensazioni come transitorie, come apparenti, come fallaci perché dipendono unicamente da speciali condizioni individuali e certe altre come durature, come permanenti, come superiori alle condizioni speciali individuali. Il lavoro scientifico ha due aspetti: uno che instancabilmente rettifica il metodo della conoscenza, e rettifica o rafforza gli organi delle sensazioni e l'altro che applica questo metodo e questi organi sempre più perfetti a stabilire ciò che di necessario esiste nelle sensazioni da ciò che è arbitrario e transitorio. Si stabilisce così ciò che è comune a tutti gli uomini, ciò che tutti gli uomini possono vedere e sentire nello stesso modo, purché essi abbiano osservato le condizioni scientifiche di accertamento. In quanto si stabilisce questa oggettività, la si afferma: si afferma l'essere in sé, l'essere permanente, l'essere comune a tutti gli uomini, l'essere indipendente da ogni punto di vista che sia meramente particolare. Ma anche questa è una concezione del mondo, è un'ideologia»¹⁰.

⁹ *QC* 4, § 41, pp. 466-67

¹⁰ *QC* 4, § 41, pp. 466-467; «I believe it is a mistake to demand that science as such prove the objectivity of the real; that is a conception of the world, a philosophy, not a scientific datum. What can science provide along these lines? Science makes a selection from among sense perceptions, from among the most basic elements of knowledge; it regards certain sensations as fleeting, illusory, and deceptive because they depend solely on special individual circumstances, and it regards other sensations as lasting, permanent and transcending special individual conditions. Scientific work has two facets: one is tirelessly rectifying the method of knowledge, and it rectifies or reinforces the organs of sensation; the other applies this method and these increasingly refined organs in order to establish what is fundamentally present in the sensations as opposed to what is arbitrary and transitory. Thus one establishes what is common to all humans, what all humans can see and feel in the same manner, provided they adhere to the scientific conditions of verification. Insofar as this objectivity is established, it is affirmed. What is affirmed is being in itself, permanent being, the being that is common to all humans, being that is

Moreover, the belief in objective reality and in the existence of the external world, is a religious, Catholic belief, in addition to one that belongs to a scientific, rational worldview¹¹. As Esteve Morera points out, Gramsci's concern is with a theory that «posited a world made by a divine will superior to any human will, and hence unchangeable by human beings»¹². Given, however, that Gramsci is critical of any presumptions to objective "proof", how does he avoid becoming himself a philosophical idealist, in the crudest sense of the term¹³?

As Fabio Frosini explains, it is through a critique of Marx's notion of ideology and, therefore, superstructure¹⁴. Frosini describes Marx's position, as rendered in Gramsci's translation of the 1859 *Prefazione* to *Il materialismo storico*:

independent of all particular viewpoints. But this, too, is a conception of the world; it is an ideology» (GRAMSCI 1996, pp. 189-190).

¹¹ *QC*, pp. 894, 1075-1076, 1078-1079, 1333, 1412-1415, 1419, 1486, 1491-1492; *QC*, pp. 1920-1921. Each reference repeats the same idea, stated most clearly in *QC* 11, § 17: «Infatti questa credenza [nella realtà del mondo esterno] è di origine religiosa, anche se chi vi partecipa è religiosamente indifferente. Poiché tutte le religioni hanno insegnato o insegnano che il mondo, la natura, l'universo è stato creato da dio prima della creazione dell'uomo e quindi l'uomo ha trovato il mondo già bell'e pronto, catalogato e definito una volta per sempre, questa credenza è diventata un dato ferreo del 'senso comune' e vive con la stessa saldezza anche se il sentimento religioso è spento o sopito» (p. 1412); «in fact, this belief [in the reality of the external world] has a religious origin, even if those who share it are indifferent to religion. Because all religions have taught and teach that the world, nature, and the universe were created by god prior to the creation of man and, therefore, man found the world readymade, categorized, and defined once and for all, this belief has become an ironclad fact of 'common sense', and survives with the same strength even if religious feeling is worn out or dormant» (author's own translation).

¹² MORERA 1990, p. 42

¹³ In Nemeth's terms: «The materialists are those who assert the primacy of matter; the idealists those who give mind or spirit as primary» (NEMETH 1980, p. 99). The notion of mind, or spirit, here encompasses the realm of ideas.

¹⁴ As articulated by Marx in *The German Ideology*, the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, *Wage Labour and Capital*, and the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (FROSINI 2010, p. 77).

«whatever the status of that kind of science [a science which “permits observation of the place in which superstructural forms ‘take root’”] and its ideological character, according to Marx, it is clear that in [Gramsci’s] expository strategy of this Marxian passage, the question is not in the slightest relative to “ideological forms” and their possible status, but, rather, relative to the necessity of *excluding them* insofar as they are judgments on events, since this criterion should be found in the scientific study of the “real base”»¹⁵.

Gramsci’s critique is of the theoretical and philosophical basis for the science of knowledge, which necessarily excludes the non-economic and strictly political concerns of “ideology”. Such a scientific basis is dependent on, as described above, the objective existence of phenomena, which remain unchanged by human perception.

The heart of the problem lies in a correspondence theory of truth, or meaning, which is pointed out by Nemeth in his summary of Bukharin’s philosophical positions¹⁶. As Bukharin writes: «cognition, considered historically, is the more and more adequate *reflection* of objective reality. The fundamental criterion of the correctness of cognition is therefore the criterion of its adequateness, its *degree of correspondence* to objective reality»¹⁷. We can understand the problem of correspondence, then, as the problem of the gap between theory and practice, which is also the “impasse of objectivism” referred to above. The solution to such an impasse is offered by a new notion of praxis, which Gramsci substitutes for vulgar concepts of

¹⁵ FROSINI 2010, p. 78; author’s own translation. As Frosini writes, «[praxis, for Marx]...means that ideological forms are forms of real *knowledge*, insofar as they are the ‘correspondents’ of practice. As this ‘correspondence’ is understood, it is obviously a question of extraordinary importance, which can be correctly approached [by Gramsci] only by emphasizing the fact that actions are not facts, or ‘things’, but antagonistic relationships. They are antagonistic relationships not between ready-made subjects, but between ‘forces’ (therefore ‘relationships among forces’), which constitute themselves in and through their relation to one another. They constitute themselves through conflict, thanks to the ideological ‘representation’ of themselves and of their relationship to other forces...the Gramscian claim of the ‘gnoseological value’ of ideologies in light of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: ideologies constitute the truth of a political position made up of different forces, making these into ‘classes’ in possession of different amounts of ‘power,’ held with respect to all other forces in a historically active manner» (FROSINI 2010, pp. 79-80; author’s own translation).

¹⁶ NEMETH 1980, p. 101.

¹⁷ Quoted in NEMETH 1980, p. 101.

historical materialism. He does so on the basis of an emphasis on individual and collective human action, which is situated in history and on the non-metaphysical ground of, in Nemeth's terms, continued exploration and analysis of what makes objective knowledge as such possible in the first place, an operation which necessarily privileges the cultural and social.

Furthermore, this idea of praxis is predicated on Gramsci's understanding of linguistic theory and language change, and is shored up by his criticism of Bertrand Russell and Benedetto Croce¹⁸ in the *Quaderni*. It should also be said outright that my focus on Russell and Croce takes space away from a crucial consideration when examining Gramsci's criticisms of Croce and the literary: the opposing model of Francesco De Sanctis¹⁹. That being said, the examples of Russell and Croce are paradigmatic because they connect Gramsci's philosophical objection to both scientific materialism and logical positivism with the related turn towards symbolic logic and logical (as opposed to natural) language. In the history of western philosophy and in Gramsci's own thought, these concepts are intimately related²⁰. Gramsci's training as a linguist²¹ puts him in a unique position in

¹⁸ The scholarship on Gramsci and Croce is quite extensive, and, as such, there is not space here to fully consider the (contested) relation between the two thinkers. However, I take the position that, while certainly indebted to Croce, Gramsci does succeed in articulating an alternative philosophy. For an introduction to the Croce-Gramsci nexus, see FINOCCHIARO 1979; GALASSO 1969; KAHN 1985; and META 2011.

¹⁹ See GERRATANA 1952.

²⁰ There is not space for such a discussion here, but the relationship continues even after western philosophy moves on from an undifferentiated interest in developing an ideal symbolic logic. This is largely due to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly his later thought in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Multiple scholars have advanced the fascinating argument that the mid-life change in Wittgenstein's thought (to summarize very generally and partially, the change is in the development of the concept of "language games" and the idea of "meaning as use") is due to the influence of Gramsci, via Piero Sraffa, who was a friend of Wittgenstein's while both were at Cambridge, and who remained in contact with Gramsci while he was in prison. See SEN 2003; DAVIS 2002; and AQUECI 2013. The heritage of the "linguistic turn" Russell and Wittgenstein represent, and its relation to philosophical Marxism and politics in general, is further worked out in the thought of the Bakhtin circle, the Frankfurt School, and the poststructuralists; there is significant overlap with Gramsci's thinking and much to be discussed and understood. See HOLUB 1992; IVES 2004a; and LANDY 1994.

regards to these philosophical questions and to the emergence of language as a conceptual battleground. The work of foregrounding the centrality of Gramsci's ideas about language²² in his overall thought has been furthered by Derek Boothman, Alessandro Carlucci, Neils Helsloot, Peter Ives, Luigi Rosiello, and Giancarlo Schirru²³. Ives points out the two major schools of linguistic thought at the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy: the positivist Neo-grammarians, and the Idealist school, represented in Italy by Benedetto Croce²⁴. Gramsci was critical of both camps, following Bartoli, and echoing his later views on positivism in general and on the possibility of Esperanto (which was also a criticism of the socialist approach to cultural issues, also at play in his pre-prison approach to more general literary movements)²⁵. His own view can be summarized as the following: language is embedded in its specific cultural and socio-historical context, language change occurs due to conflict between competing linguistic forms, and language is a shared structure that exceeds the speech of specific individuals²⁶.

Throughout the *Quaderni del carcere*, Gramsci only cites Russell twice, but in a paradigmatic way²⁷. At the end of *QC* 4, § 41, he writes:

«ricordo una affermazione di Bertrando Russell: si può immaginare sulla terra, anche senza l'uomo, non Glasgow e Londra, ma due punti della superficie della terra uno più a Nord e uno più a Sud (o qualcosa di simile: è contenuta in un libretto filosofico di Russell tradotto in una collezioncina Sonzogno di carattere scientifico). Ma senza l'uomo come significherebbe Nord e Sud, e "punto", e

²¹ Gramsci studied with the linguist Matteo Bartoli, a follower of the nineteenth-century linguist Graziadio Isaia Ascoli, at the University of Turin. Bartoli was engaged in a polemic with the German neo-grammarian school, which took a positivist approach to historical comparative linguistics. See the chapter "Bartoli's polemic against the Neogrammarians" in Ives 2004b, pp. 47-54.

²² For an overview of Gramsci's theory of language and linguistics, see DE MAURO 1991, pp. 135-44.

²³ BOOTHMAN 2004; CARLUCCI 2013; HELSLOOT 1989; Ives 2004b; ROSSIello 1986; SCHIRRU 1998, 2008a; 2008b; 2010; 2011; 2016.

²⁴ Ives 2004b, pp. 43-55.

²⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 47, 55.

²⁶ See Ives 2004b, p. 55 for a more detailed discussion of Gramsci's specific views on language.

²⁷ Russell and his example are cited again (with Edinburgh instead of Glasgow) in *QC* 11, § 20, pp. 1418-1419.

“superficie”, e “terra”? Non sono queste espressioni necessariamente legate all’uomo, ai suoi bisogni, alla sua vita, alla sua attività? Senza l’attività dell’uomo, creatrice di tutti i valori anche scientifici, cosa sarebbe l’“oggettività”? Un caos, cioè niente, il vuoto, se pure così si può dire, perché realmente se si immagina che non esista l’uomo, non si può immaginare la lingua e il pensiero. Per il materialismo storico non si può staccare il pensare dall’essere, l’uomo dalla natura, l’attività (storia) dalla materia, il soggetto dall’oggetto: se si fa questo distacco si cade nel chiacchiericcio, nell’astrazione senza senso»²⁸.

To not separate “thinking” from “being”, then, one must look at the shared aspects of subjective reality, which are culture, worldview, and, of course, language. It is thus not an accident that Russell is Gramsci’s example, even though he is not here explicitly referring to Russell’s investment in the creation (or discovery) of an ideal, logical language²⁹. Rather than a notion of objectivity that requires the objective to be outside of, and indifferent to, human perception, Gramsci proposes an idea of consensus via recourse to an “objective” reality, in the sense of understanding reality as the result of a relation between a subject and her objects of thought and perception. Where objects are held in common by different individual subjects, Gramsci’s interest is in understanding how they are inflected and transformed by different circumstances and conditions, and vice versa. This understanding is not only his insistence on the broader importance of culture, and its reciprocal relationship to the conditions of

²⁸ *QC* 4, § 41, pp. 466-467; «I remember a statement by Bertrand Russell: one can imagine on earth, even in the absence of man, not Glasgow or London but two points on the surface of the earth, one of which is farther north and the other farther south (or something similar; it is to be found in a short philosophical work by Russell, translated as part of the small scientific series published by Sonzogno). But, in the absence of man, what would be the meaning of north and south, and ‘point’, and ‘surface’, and ‘earth’? Aren’t these words necessarily linked to man, his needs, his life, his activity? In the absence of human activity, which creates all values, including scientific values, what would ‘objectivity’ be? Chaos, or nothingness, emptiness—if one can even say this much, for if one were really to imagine that man did not exist, it would be impossible to imagine language and thought. In historical materialism thought cannot be separated from being, man from nature, activity (history) from matter, subject from object: such a separation would be a fall into empty talk, meaningless abstraction» (GRAMSCI 1996, p. 190).

²⁹ For a concise summary of Russell’s philosophy as regards sense data, perception, and subjectivity, and the implications therein for artistic representation, see BANFIELD 1990.

materiality, but springs from and coincides with his views on language and linguistic meaning.

This becomes even clearer in his rebuttal to Croce's famous 1905 essay on linguistic sense, nonsense, and reference, "questa tavola rotonda è quadrata," which appears in the final *Quaderno* 29, dedicated to a consideration of grammar. Gramsci argues that Croce is wrong, even on his own terms, in concurring with the German linguist Heymann Steinthal that the titular proposition is grammatical but illogical and, furthermore, ugly³⁰. Gramsci's claim is that the proposition, even for Croce, has an expressive function³¹ and can be justified on those grounds. The same can be said for grammatically incorrect statements: «In realtà tutto ciò che (non) è "grammaticalmente esatto" può anche essere giustificato dal punto di vista estetico, logico, ecc., se lo si vede non nella particolare logica, ecc., dell'espressione immediatamente meccanica, ma come elemento di una rappresentazione più vasta e comprensiva»³². This observation points to the importance of the example, since it presents us with the fundamental question, «Cosa è la grammatica? [What is grammar?]». As Gramsci explains,

«la grammatica è "storia" o "documento storico": essa è la "fotografia" di una fase determinata di un linguaggio nazionale (collettivo) [formatosi storicamente e in continuo sviluppo], o i tratti fondamentali di una fotografia. La questione pratica può essere: a che fine tale fotografia? Per fare la storia di un aspetto della civiltà o per modificare un aspetto della civiltà? La pretesa del Croce porterebbe a negare ogni valore a un quadro rappresentante [tra l'altro] una... sirena, per esempio, cioè si

³⁰ Gramsci's response appears in *QC* 29, § 1, pp. 2341-342. It appears in translation as *Croce's Essay "This Round Table is Square"*, in GRAMSCI 1985, pp. 179-80.

³¹ Croce's position on language is glossed by Ives: «...language is understood purely as expression. It is just the conglomeration of individual speech acts which are each aesthetic acts of the speaker...From such a perspective, Croce and his linguistic followers argue that the aesthetic acts that constitute language are never themselves repeatable. To argue otherwise, according to Croce, would be to falsely separate the content of an expression from the act of speaking» (IVES 2004b, pp. 53-54).

³² *QC* 29, § 1, p. 2341; «in reality, everything that is [not] 'grammatically correct' can also be justified from the aesthetic and logical point of view if one sees it as an element of a broader and a more comprehensive representation, rather than within the particular logic of the immediately mechanical expression» (GRAMSCI 1985, p. 179).

dovrebbe concludere che ogni proposizione deve corrispondere al *vero* o al *verosimile*, ecco»³³.

This understanding of grammar accords with Gramsci's views as a university student, and points away from a correspondence theory of meaning, whether that correspondence is with an objective external reality, as in the scientific paradigm of Neogrammarian linguistics, or with a subjective internal expression, as in Crocean idealism. Meaning, or truth, is not a matter of verisimilitude, nor can it be abstracted a-historically through an objective analysis. This is not only a version of Gramsci's reformulation of the Marxian superstructure, against positivism, but it also has profound implications for his views on literary criticism and aesthetics.

Given that, as Giuseppe Petronio reminds us, «Antonio Gramsci non fu certo un critico letterario nel senso preciso, tecnico, della parola»³⁴ it is tempting to reduce Gramsci's thinking to what is now, from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, an easily recognizable cultural and sociological turn. Letterio Cassata, in his 1969 survey of scholarship on Gramsci's literary criticism, points this out as the major theoretical stumbling block to overcome when attempting to conceptualize a Gramscian view on matters of literary aesthetics³⁵. However, Gramsci himself identifies, and attempts to think through, this problem, which he recognizes in the Crocean-idealist "unity" of form and content, where form is initially privileged for its ability to subsume, and therefore transcend, content³⁶. As Nikša Stipčević explains,

³³ *QC* 29, § 1, pp. 2341-342; «grammar is "history" or "a historical document": it is the "photograph" of a given phase of a national (collective) language that has been formed historically and is continuously developing, or the fundamental traits of a photograph. The practical question might be: what is the purpose of such a photograph? To record the history of an aspect of civilization or to modify an aspect of civilization? Croce's claim would lead one to deny that a picture depicting, among other things, a...siren, for example, has any value. In other words, one would have to conclude that every proposition must correspond to the *true* or to *verisimilitude*» (GRAMSCI 1985, pp. 179-180).

³⁴ «Antonio Gramsci was certainly not a literary critic in the strict sense of the word» (author's own translation), PETRONIO 1969, pp. 287-90.

³⁵ CASSATA 1969, pp. 215-221.

³⁶ For a skeptical interpretation of Gramsci's views, see the chapter "Gramsci e la letteratura," in GUGLIELMI 1976, pp. 127-56.

«already in the first edition of his *Aesthetics*, Croce outlines that “the aesthetic act is, therefore, form and nothing other than form”, so that in the aesthetic transposition, the impression (content) and expression (form) combine into a single entity. Later, Croce will return more than once to the dualism of “form and content” and develop and dissolve it with ever more coherence, therefore getting ever closer to a dialectical resolution, in such a way that the Marxist Gramsci will be able to extrapolate from this system and give it materialist significance»³⁷.

The only notebook dedicated entirely to “Critica letteraria” is Notebook 23, while the most important note on the topic is found in *QC* 15, § 38, where Gramsci discusses the view that «l’arte è arte e non propaganda politica “voluta” e proposta»³⁸. He is attempting to reconcile this idea with his own notion of the need for «[la] formazione di determinate correnti culturali che siano il riflesso del loro tempo e che contribuiscano a rafforzare determinate correnti politiche»³⁹. For Gramsci, these two ideas are not incompatible since, as he describes in *QC* 4, § 36, the criteria for literary judgment include not just complete originality of fused content and form, but also new ideas, structures, and organizational principles⁴⁰. This accords with what he writes in *QC* 15, § 38:

«posto il principio che nell’opera d’arte sia solamente da ricercare il carattere artistico, non è per nulla esclusa la ricerca di quale massa di sentimenti, di quale atteggiamento verso la vita circoli nell’opera d’arte stessa. Anzi ciò che sia ammesso dalle moderne correnti estetiche si vede nel De Sanctis e nello stesso Croce. Ciò che si esclude è che un’opera sia bella per il suo contenuto morale e politico e non già

³⁷ STIPČEVIĆ, 1968, pp. 26-27, author’s own translation. To wit: «In Gramsci, the Crocean aesthetic equation essentially transforms. He accepts Croce’s point about the reciprocal dependence of form and content, so that the form also becomes the content of the work, and the content also its own form. In Gramsci, however, these two concepts have a completely different value. While, for Croce, leaving aside the eventual changes to this relationship, content is, in the first place, ‘impression’ (or, later, ‘sentiment’) and form ‘expression.’ Gramsci liberates these two united concepts from the abstract yoke of intuitive aesthetics, uncoupling them from an *a priori* synthesis and giving them a real materialist significance» (STIPČEVIĆ 1968, p. 28; author’s own translation).

³⁸ *QC* 15, § 38, p. 1793; «art is art and not political propaganda purposefully designed» (author’s own translation).

³⁹ *QC* 15, § 38, p. 1793; «the formation of specific cultural currents that could be the reflection of their time, and could contribute to reinforcing specific political trends» (author’s own translation).

⁴⁰ *QC* 4, § 36, p. 454.

per la sua forma in cui il contenuto astratto si è fuso e immedesimato. Ancora si ricerca se un'opera d'arte non sia fallita perché l'autore sia stato deviato da preoccupazioni pratiche esteriori, cioè posticce e insincere. Questo pare il punto cruciale della polemica: Tizio "vuole" esprimere artificiosamente un determinato contenuto e non fa opera d'arte»⁴¹.

Art that aims only to express a pre-determined "lesson" or ideology, in the crude sense of the term, is almost certainly ugly, or bad, since distraction from guiding formal, aesthetic principles can only detract from the quality of the combined impression-expression. However, this is a normative aesthetics based on discarding works that attempt to privilege content over form, which, ironically, ends up itself privileging form over content. Gramsci is skeptical of this approach, since it does not get any closer to understanding the aesthetic nature of the work, which can, and does, include the world-view and attitude towards life operative therein.

The separation of political content from aesthetic form also leads to a type of criticism that allows for dismissal of a work of art not on aesthetic, but on vulgar ideological grounds. Gramsci comes down harshly on this:

«il critico politico dunque denuncia Tizio, non come artista, ma come "opportunista politico". Che l'uomo politico faccia una pressione perché l'arte del suo tempo esprima un determinato mondo culturale è attività politica, non di critica artistica: se il mondo culturale per il quale si lotta è un fatto vivente e necessario, la sua espansività sarà irresistibile, esso troverà i suoi artisti. Ma se nonostante la pressione, questa irresistibilità non si vede e non opera, significa che si trattava di un mondo fittizio e posticcio, elucubrazione cartacea di mediocri che si lamentano che gli uomini di maggior statura non siano d'accordo con loro. Lo stesso modo di porre la questione può essere un indizio della saldezza di un tal mondo morale e culturale: e infatti il così detto "calligrafismo" non è che la difesa di piccoli artisti che opportunisticamente affermano certi principii ma si sentono incapaci di

⁴¹ QC 15, § 38, p. 1793; «the principle that, in a work of art, one is only interested in artistic character, in no way excludes the study of the nodes of feeling, and of the attitudes toward life, that circulate in the work itself. In fact, this is what is already admitted by the modern ideas of aesthetics that one sees in [Francesco] De Sanctis and [Benedetto] Croce. What *is* excluded is that a work is beautiful for its political and moral content and not for its form, into which the abstract content has been fused and submerged. One still asks if a work of art fails because its author has been derailed by external, practical preoccupations, that is, ones that are false and insincere. This seems to be the heart of the polemic: John Doe 'wants' to artificially express a specific content and therefore does not make art» (author's own translation).

esprimerli artisticamente cioè nell'attività loro propria e allora vaneggiano di pura forma che è il suo stesso contenuto ecc. ecc. Il principio formale della distinzione delle categorie spirituali e della loro unità di circolazione, pur nel suo astrattismo, permette di cogliere la realtà effettuale e di criticare l'arbitrarietà e la pseudovita di chi non vuole giocare a carte scoperte o è semplicemente un mediocre che è stato dal caso posto a un luogo di comando»⁴².

That Gramsci is not advocating for the imposition of specific, politicized content (or form) in art is significant because, for him, it has a theoretical basis. As he writes, neither the political nor the art critic judges the “political art work” on aesthetic grounds: both condemn it, in different ways, for its “ideological” content. The possibility that the world Gramsci is fighting for will not, of its own accord, find adequate artistic expression must be left open; to think otherwise is to fall into the metaphysical materialist trap.

While it is true that Gramsci does not (and perhaps cannot) consider form and content as completely inseparable, he certainly goes as far as possible in that direction, in his commentary throughout the *Quaderni del carcere* on various literary figures and works, by analyzing both of these aspects and fitting them into the larger panorama of other aesthetic movements and trends, and the social-political moment. That he is able to do this is a result, as I have described, of what Frosini has termed the “immanentist” approach to classical philosophical materialism, also known as the philosophy of praxis, in which he critiques both positivism and

⁴² *QC* 15, § 38, p. 1794; «the political critic, therefore, denounces Tizio, not as an artist, but as a ‘political opportunist’. That the politician exerts pressure so that the art of her time expresses a determined cultural world is political activity, not aesthetic criticism: if the cultural world for which we fight is a living and necessary fact, its expansiveness will be irresistible and it will find its artists. But if, notwithstanding such pressure, this irresistibility does not occur and is not operative, it means that we are dealing with a fictive and false world, a cardboard projection by mediocre people who complain that people of greater status do not agree with them. The way of posing the question can itself be an indication of the strength of such a moral and cultural world: and, in fact, so-called ‘calligraphism’ is not other than the self-defense of lesser artists who opportunistically affirm certain principles but feel themselves incapable of expressing them artistically, in their very own sphere of activity. As a result, they rave about pure form which is its own content, etc, etc. The formal principle of the distinction between spiritual categories and the unity of their circulation, in its very abstraction, permits the capturing of reality and the criticism of arbitrariness and a kind of pseudo-life by those who do not want to put their cards on the table, or who are simply mediocre people who occupy a position of power simply by chance» (author’s own translation).

idealism. This is a version of the reformulation of the concept of ideology, and it is consistent with, and indebted to, his views on language and linguistic meaning. For Gramsci, language is reducible to neither objectifiable, external laws of grammar and correctness, nor to the willed expression of a single mind or spirit. These views are not actually critically opposed, since the epistemological question of scientific objectivity leads directly to the problem of subjective psychologism. Therefore, it is not possible to look at literature as the apex of correct, grammatical expression by an individual who embodies the values of cosmopolitan learning and intellectual endeavors. This approach is the traditional one taken to the history of Italian literature (and, most broadly, to the general canon of western literature), and to the broad cultural, nationalistic relevance of literature itself.

Gramsci's take on literary criticism is a hugely significant conceptual move, in the scope of twentieth-century philosophy and critical theory, and one that has been largely overshadowed by the greater critical emphasis on totalizing structures and systems. On the most basic level, Gramsci is arguing that language, and linguistic meaning, have both subjective and objective valences that cannot be reduced to theories of reference or correspondence. This is a view of language as immanent and embodied "object", or matter, that is somehow able to convey its own reality through the speaking, or writing, subject. This view also implies that the modulation of individual subjective reality has concrete, systematic political effects, and that this is one of the arguments for understanding acts of language, and works of literature and culture, from within this framework. As such, the kind of historical materialism at work in Gramsci's philosophy of praxis has consequences for, and originates in, an understanding of language and linguistic meaning that rejects any correspondence theory of meaning. Consequently, aesthetic judgment, including literary criticism, maintains a unity of form and content while rejecting facile attempts to reduce the global meaning of a "political" work of art to its ideological content, where ideology is understood in the sense of a series of theoretical propositions about the world, which reside in the realm of traditional Marxist superstructure. In this view, all works of art are political in that they participate, and take place, in the empirical world. Instead of following a line of thinking that would perpetuate a separation of the empirical and intellectual realms, Gramsci's expanded notion of ideology, wherein there is no recourse to either a scientific objectivity or a relativistic emphasis on subjectivity, guides his views. Here, as elsewhere in the Gramsci of the

Quaderni del carcere, comprehending the concept of ideology requires a mutual comprehension of the power structures that regulate not only material and economic conditions, but also the circumstances most intimately related to the work of thought and culture.

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