Quattro studi sull’estetica del positivismo e altri scritti by Ennio Scolari

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"A year after his sudden and tearing death, Nanni Scolari's friends have kept their promise to publish his writings, specifically those works which he has left completed but scattered in journals, anthologies, and prefaces." With these words, Luciano Anceschi introduces us to the volume *Quattro studi sull'estetica del positivismo e altri scritti* (edited by P. Bagni and A. Serra, with a preface by Anceschi) which comprises Scolari's writings from 1958 to 1982. The first part of the book includes the studies on the aesthetics of positivism, of which a long one is on Taine ("An Approach to Hippolyte Taine," 1965), two, more recent ones, on Zola ("Zola and the Experimental Novel" and "Notes towards a Definition of Zola's Poetics"), and his last written text on "The Aesthetics of Positivism; Outline of an Investigation." The second part of the book comprises articles and reviews published in *il verri*, of which Scolari was the editor for many years.

It is important to note that this book is not a "collection of scattered writings" but, as Anceschi notes, a series of essays, articles, and reviews that show an evident unity and consistency which "complement one another, revealing, at last, a thematic emphasis, and the care of the critical attitude for both the subject matter chosen and the procedures employed."

In fact, the first essay published by Scolari (a 1958 review which appeared in *il verri*) already reveals, as its specific locus, a critical sensitivity toward the neoidealistic approach. Scolari goes on to denounce the faults of Crocean aesthetics while examining more closely the technical and expressive elements that affect the work of art as a concrete phenomenon. This essay is followed by a longer one on Hippolyte Taine, a preferred target of the neoidealists in their critique against positivism at a time when "those who disputed the validity of positivism condemned, in their own arbitrary right, all those who articulated, instead, a positive judgment." Scolari quotes the categorical judgment of Croce on Taine ("In his studies he gave pride of place not to truth but to science"), exposing the vagaries of a critical attitude which made purely peremptory and groundless assertions. The rejection of the aesthetical dogma of Croce is the *terminus a quo* of Scolari's discourse; it constitutes the beginning of the reevaluation of positivism, which is the specific subject of his research.

Setting himself against the oversimplified proposals of the antipositivistic reaction at the beginning of the twentieth century, Scolari was among the most resolute supporters of the need for a new and more profound evaluation aimed at recovering the authentic values of positivistic culture. Moreover, he invites us, in opposition to the neoidealistic school, to reevaluate the period of time in which a vast number of disciplines originate and seek autonomy, ranging from sociology to anthropology, from psychology to linguistics; that period of time which witnesses profound changes in the scientific field, and vast economic and social modifications induced by new methods and new means of production; that period of time when positivism has an international echo, affects the way of thinking and seeing, guides an entire generation of intellectuals, penetrates in the schools, and acts upon a large population stratum, becoming thus a common denominator.

Being aware that "every ostracism leads to a revisitation, that every falsification or silence leads to a new reading
of those superstitions that have charac-
terized an era," Scolari begins his
studies by freeing the field of every
preconceived attitude. For example, he
examines and critiques the identifica-
tion of positivism with Comte and his
school. He also delves into the thesis
according to which Taine is an "or-
thodox" positivist who contributed
nothing to "official positivism"; and fi-
nally he explores the discrediting
image of a Zola seen as a "pathetic"
positivist and mere "photographer" of
reality. After this pars destruens,
Scolari proposes an image of positivism seen
as a "complex and dynamic" cultural
refferent, "flexible and open, whose
aim was the research of common traits,
of unifying moments." Thus, he dwells
upon Taine and Zola, examining more
closely known connections and
suggesting less known ones (those be-
tween Taine and Comte, Mill and
Hegel; between Zola and Claude Ber-
nard, Musset, Michelet, Fourier),
penetrating the intimate causes of their
art and of their theoretical reflection.

Of equal interest is the second part of
the book dedicated to the shorter writ-
ings (mostly reviews) which appeared
in il verri, where there's evident a
polemic vivacity which denotes Scolari
as an attentive and acute reader. Espe-
sially interesting is the article on Ar-
mando Plebe written when Scolari was
a little over twenty years of age in
which—with firmness and self-
assurance—he brings to light the limi-
tations of the volume Processo all'es-
ettica:

In fact, one has the impression, in reading
Plebe’s book, that his conclusions are not
the result of a research, but that the research
itself was intended to show that those con-
clusions were necessarily to be drawn,
a very firm critical review which at the
time of its appearance caused some
surprise but which was later followed
by a favorable debate.

Quattro studi sull'estetica del
positivismo e altri scritti gives us—linked
by a precise thread that is, above all, a
constant methodological aware-
ness—a reflection which is the result of
many years of research and which, per-
haps due to its too scrupulous pro-
fessional rigor, has not reached more
conspicuous results. The study of
positivist aesthetics, especially the
"problem" Zola, engaged Scolari in
meticulous research which lasted for
over twenty years: an intense, patient
work characterized by a flexible
methodological perspective which, in
never denying the very possibility of
change, is therefore open to unformu-
lated thematics, to different theories, to
any other possible approach.

An outline for a project; hypothesis,
materials, notes towards a research—
these were some of the key words used
by Scolari to describe his studies. This
attitude reveals the discreetness and
modesty of the man, but it also deter-
moves the basis of a method according
to which

one should stand in front of reality without
any preconceived beliefs, notions, bold con-
jectures, abandoning all assumptions so as
to allow reality to speak for itself through
our description of its structures.

Thus, Scolari did not believe that
theories should be based on static,
definite rules, or that they should
always obey the same laws. Rather,
theories should be formulated as the
results indicate, employing a method
which is open, flexible, capable of
exploring new frontiers, sensitive to
new developments and interpreta-
tions. In Scolari's studies on the aes-
thetics of positivism there is an evident
respect for this method—Luciano
Anceschi's "new critical phe-
nomenology"—which, while on the
one hand it assures validity and scien-
tific rigor, on the other hand it paves
the way for those who want to
approach the subject free of any pre-conceived notions, willing to break the customary boundaries in an attempt to envisage productive ideas.

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La Svolta Testuale,
Il Decostruzionismo in Derrida,
Lyotard, Gli “Yale Critics”
By Maurizio Ferraris
Pavia: Cooperativa Libraria Universitaria, 1984

As Ferraris notes at the end of the book, some of the material of La Svolta Testuale (The Textual Turn) has appeared before in journals. It is now put together to provide the Italian reader (but not only) with an overview of deconstruction, of its practitioners (Derrida, Lyotard) and of the literary schools that were inspired by it. For the general reader in particular, the book is useful for its informative value and detailed exposition of theoretical texts, as well as for the valuable bibliographical references in the notes that direct the reader to material available in Italian translation. Here lies the strength of Ferraris’s book.

If there are weaknesses they lie in the breadth of the material covered that allows only for brief, summary remarks on aspects of the issue of deconstruction that deserve better documentation. While the best chapter of the book is without a doubt the one on Lyotard, an author Ferraris knows well, the weakest is the one on American textualism; Ferraris in fact devotes little space to it and does not really explore the literary implications of deconstruction for literature and can only mention them in passing. One gets the feeling that Ferraris is not really at home here or else that he is not very much interested in the issues other than to summarize them for his readers.

This imbalance in the treatment of deconstruction gives the false impression that the question of the literary is marginal to the philosophical. This question overlooks the fact, which Ferraris is the first to point out, that the success of deconstruction and of Derrida in America was mainly due to the enthusiastic response of Literature Departments who were the first to appropriate the “new” philosophy. This was never the case with Lyotard, for example, and this is partly the reason why Lyotard is still, as Ferraris notes, a marginal figure.

In La Svolta Testuale, instead, Lyotard gets an exhaustive text-by-text analysis, most of which is marginal to the issue of deconstruction, while the question of the literary is barely covered. The issue is further confused by discussing together “schools” of different tendencies, like destructionism and paracriticism, which have little to do with deconstruction.

A second and most important issue is the methodology Ferraris adopts. He accepts Richard Rorty’s distinction of deconstruction and textualism as well as the further differentiation in “strong textualism” and “weak textualism” which is yet another way of distinguishing arbitrarily between texts that are and are not literary. Ferraris does not accept Rorty’s generalizations uncritically. His critique, however, aims at bringing Rorty’s typology closer to Derrida’s notion of deconstruction and to widen the definition of textualism to encompass more “schools” of criticism. Ror-