



In Search of a Unity or Persistence of Tragedy? On Simmel's City Writings

Vincenzo Mele

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Article abstract

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VICENZO MELE

In Search of a Unity or Persistence of Tragedy? On Simmel's City Writings

Abstract. *This article is devoted to an analysis of Simmel's "metaphysical longing" (metaphysische Sehnsucht) and its consequences for his cultural and sociological analysis of the city and, consequently, modernity. Simmel's "metaphysical longing" expresses itself equally in the sought-after relationship between part and whole, surface and depth, reality and idea. It intends to explore especially how this approach is developed in Simmel's so-called minor essays, including the essays on historic Italian cities that are often referred to as those most characteristic of this metaphysical longing for unity. However, to understand the essence and characteristics of this approach, it is necessary to explore other minor, preparatory essays, coeval with and following the Philosophy of Money, which attest to Simmel's path toward the construction of what he himself had defined as "sociological aesthetics," that is, a space of analysis intermediate between philosophy and empirical sociological science. At the end of this path, we will see some stages of Simmel's conceptual journey from nostalgia as Sehnsucht toward acceptance of the tragedy of culture, that is, the impossibility for man to find the lost unity of nature and spirit, form and life.*

1. *Metaphysische Sehnsucht*

In a 1916 fragment from the *Nachlaß*, Simmel makes the following retrospective reflection on his own work:

When I draw the balance, I may have contributed the following original basic motifs to the development of the spirit. The transcendence of life, the characterization of life according to which every moment of its continuous becoming different is not a part of it, but the whole of life in the form of this particular moment, the individual law, the founding thought of sociology, the concept of truth developed from life (which afterwards

arose quite crudely and obliquely, but independently of my hidden work, as pragmatism). Then the more functional motifs: in the philosophy of money, the attempt to derive the whole external and internal development of culture from the development of a single cultural element, to understand the individual line as a symbol of the whole picture; the type of work such as on the handle, the ruin, the picture frame, bridge and door etc., in which it is shown that beneath every small superficiality lies a pathway through which it is connected to the ultimate metaphysical depths; finally, the studies in which a historical phenomenon is treated as the realization of one of the great ideas of humanity, the possibilities of humanity – first worked out purely in the Michelangelo essay, then in Goethe and Rembrandt. These three methodological motifs are basically one, growing out of a metaphysical longing (*einer metaphysischen Sehnsucht*) that expresses itself equally in the sought-after relationship between part and whole, surface and depth, reality and idea. In addition, there are some smaller things: the religion-philosophical motif in the essay: the problem of the religious situation, the a priori of historical understanding, the art-philosophical thought in the Rembrandt chapter: “What do we see in the work of art?” (Simmel, 2016 [1916]: 71)¹.

¹ 1916. Wenn ich die Bilanz ziehe, so habe ich vielleicht folgende originale Grundmotive zu der Geistesentwicklung beigesteuert. Die Transscendenz des Lebens, die Charakterisierung des Lebens, wonach jeder Moment seines kontinuierlichen Anderswerdens nicht ein Theil seiner, sondern das ganze Leben in der Form dieses besonderen Momentes ist, das individuelle Gesetz, der begründende Gedanke der Soziologie, der aus dem Leben entwickelte Wahrheitsbegriff (der nachher ganz roh und schief, aber von meiner versteckten Arbeit unabhängig, als Pragmatismus aufgekommen ist). Dann die mehr funktionellen Motive: in der Geldphilosophie der Versuch, an der Entwicklung eines einzelnen Kulturelementes die ganze äussere und innere Kulturentwicklung abzurollen, die einzelne Linie als Symbol des Gesamtbildes zu begreifen; der Typus von Arbeiten wie über den Henkel, die Ruine, den Bildrahmen, Brücke und Thuer u.a., in denen gezeigt wird, dass unter jeder kleinen Oberflächlichkeit ein Kanal liegt, durch den sie mit den letzten metaphysischen Tiefen verbunden ist;

Simmel seems here to point to a unified moment in his work, perhaps dictated by an inner personal spiritual need, perhaps in response to the criticism that has always lurked regarding the alleged lack of a center to his philosophical thought. In analogy to the prediction made in the famous aphorism devoted to the characteristics of his philosophical legacy, the “cash money” form of thought² clearly runs the risk of providing only stimuli that, while brilliant and insightful in their particularity, do not add up to a “totality” that is the point of view to which all philosophy aspires. The unifying element of Simmel’s thought – at the origin of his most original contribution “to the development of the spirit” (*Geistesentwicklung*) – would precisely be the “metaphysical longing” (*metaphysische Sehnsucht*) expressed in the sought-after relationship between “part and whole, surface and depth, reality and idea.”

This article will attempt to focus precisely on this “metaphysical longing” and its consequences for the philosophical and sociological analysis of the city and, consequently, modernity. First, therefore, let us try to understand what the general features of this “metaphysical longing” are and then subsequently observe its

endlich die Studien, in denen eine historische Erscheinung als Realisirung je einer der grossen Menschheitsideen, Menschheitsmöglichkeiten behandelt wird – zuerst rein herausgearbeitet im Michelangelo-Aufsatz, dann im Goethe und im Rembrandt. Diese drei methodischen Motive sind im Grunde eines, entwachsen einer metaphysischen Sehnsucht, die sich in dem gesuchten Verhältniss zwischen Theil und Ganzem, Oberfläche und Tiefe, Realität und Idee gleichmässig ausdrückt. Dazu kommen noch einige kleinere Dinge: das religionsphilosophische Motiv in dem Aufsatz: das Problem der religiösen Lage, das Apriori des historischen Erkennens, der kunstphilosophische Gedanke in dem Rembrandt-Kapitel: “Was sehen wir am Kunstwerk ?” (Simmel, 2016: 71).

² In a famous aphorism contained in Simmel’s Posthumous Diary (*Aus dem nachgelassenen Tagebuche*, in *Fragmente und Aufsätze aus dem Nachlaß* edited by G. Kantorowicz, Drei Masken, München 1923: 3-46) Simmel writes: “I know that I shall die without intellectual heirs, and that is as it should be. My legacy will be, as it were, in cash, distributed to many heirs, each transforming his part into use conformed to his nature: a use which will reveal no longer its indebtedness to this heritage” (quoted in L. A. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977: 198-199).

characteristics in Simmel's classic essays on historical Italian cities: Rome, Florence and Venice. Indeed, how does this "metaphysical nostalgia longing" stand in relation to Simmel's work, which takes place for all intents and purposes in an era thought of in different senses (Nietzsche, Dilthey, Heidegger) as "the end of metaphysics"? What is this "metaphysical longing" about? The term metaphysics, as is known, specifically indicates attention to the oldest and most basic problem of philosophy, namely the question of Being, that is, the search for an absolute truth beyond sensible experience. Wilhelm Dilthey in his 1907 paper *The Essence of Philosophy* accurately described the context in which a new wave of "metaphysical nostalgia" grew and thrived in the second half of the nineteenth century, a context in which he himself and Simmel were trained. Dilthey describes the philosophy of the second half of the nineteenth century as a "philosophy of life" in the sense of a reflection on existence that renounces all "scientific" claims to validity and foundation, the greatest exponent of which would be Friedrich Nietzsche, who moving within a horizon opened by Schopenhauer inaugurated the tradition of philosopher-writers: "this kind of writing", wrote Dilthey about these authors, "is akin to the ancient art of the sophists and rhetoricians, whom Plato banished so sternly from the realm of philosophy... Their art of persuasion is strangely combined with an awful seriousness and a great sincerity. Their eyes remain focused on the riddle of life, but they despair of solving it by a universally valid metaphysics, a theory of the world-order. Life is to be explained in terms of itself – that is the great thought that links these writers with experience of the world and with poetry" (Dilthey, 1954: 31). Their explanation of life is "unsystematic", but "impressive" and suggestive. Here Dilthey refers to Montaigne as a kind of forerunner of this style, continued later by Carlyle, Emerson, Ruskin, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, and Maeterlinck, all of whom also had some relation to systematic philosophy and yet even more consciously rejected it. It would be a mistake, however, to associate Simmel unreservedly with this

tradition – a mistake Dilthey does not make –, which would overlook his long and significant adherence to neo-Kantianism and his fundamental contribution to the debate on the foundation of the social-historical sciences. Simmel himself in a well-known aphorism – entitled *Kein Dichter* (“not a poet”) – published in December 1900 in the journal *Jugend* had said of himself “reality is too strong for me – I was a poet, not a poet” (Simmel, 2005 [1900]: 401), almost as if to implicitly distance himself from this important cultural current contemporary to him. However, one cannot even deny the importance of this portrait of Dilthey for understanding and framing the philosophical climate in which Simmel was formed and in which his “metaphysical longing” was born and developed, which undoubtedly found a fulfilled expression in his final work *Intuition of Life. Four Metaphysical Chapters* (1918).

Simmel’s position within the current of the philosophy of life, however, was from the beginning decidedly original compared with that of Nietzsche or Bergson (or his poet friend Stephan George). A few years before his philosophical testament, in the introduction to *Philosophische Kultur* (1911) Simmel had precisely characterized his idea of metaphysics, speaking of a “turn from metaphysics as dogma to metaphysics as life and function” (Simmel, 1997a [1911]: 35). It was no longer a question of the possibility of arriving at Being, at the thing in itself, but of saving at least the “form” of this spiritual attitude that would take into consideration the totality of existence. To summarize this conception, Simmel had proposed a fable as an example. A dying farmer tells his children that a treasure is buried in his field. They then set out to dig far and wide without finding anything. The following year, however, the land thus worked produces a crop three times as large. “All this,” Simmel observes, “symbolizes the line of metaphysics indicated here” (ibid.: 36). Metaphysics as intended by Simmel is thus this “digging” understood as the “inner determination of our minds”: “we will not find the treasure, but the world we have dug through in search of it will bring a triple harvest to the spirit” (ibid.).

Simmel traces here the program of what we can call “formal metaphysics,” which performs the functions of metaphysics while not having its content: “Nothing prevents it from taking the path indicated, and many others by turn, and it is now more faithful and adaptable to the symptoms of things in such devotion to the metaphysical function than the jealousy of a material exclusivity would permit” (ibid.: 34). Freed from the search for an absolute principle, this spiritual attitude is able to include “the inconspicuous segments of existence” in “unnumerable directions” (ibid.: 35). The path of this extremely dynamic philosophical life can be unified and personally characterized, despite the large number of twists and turns it passes through. It would be wrong to judge this way of proceeding as “eclecticism” or “the wisdom of compromise,” although it is clearly possible to identify in it the characteristics of these attitudes of the spirit. Metaphysics as function or life in fact aims at “fixed results of thought than is any one-sided exclusive philosophy” (ibid.). It is distinguished from the latter by the fact that it fills “the same form, not with a single principled thought but with a mosaic of pieces of such thought, or gradually reduce their differences to the point of compatibility” (ibid.).

The most proper figure expressing this spiritual dynamism is coquetry, to which a fundamental essay is devoted within the collection *Philosophische Kultur*. Coquetry, for Simmel, is not only a phenomenon concerning eroticism or the relation between the sexes (a playful form of association) but also a playful form of knowledge. Indeed, as he attests at the end of the essay, “the soul has found the appropriate form for its relationship to countless things in that playful approach and withdrawal – even though it is certainly not always accompanied by the attitude of “play” – in the act of taking hold of something only in order to let it fall again, of letting it fall only to take hold of it again, in what could be called the tentative turning toward something on which the shadow if its own denial already falls” (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 152).

The ambivalent play of yes and no, of seduction and rejection that takes place between erotic partners for Simmel becomes a general cognitive principle, which – as Ernst Bloch had observed albeit critically – becomes symbolic of a philosophy of “perhaps,” of undecidability (rather than indecision), of possibility and unresolvable ambivalence of truth. Simmel’s thought is constantly searching for analogies, opposite “dualisms” (*Kant und Goethe*, *Schopenhauer und Nietzsche*, *Kant und Nietzsche*) “problems” (*Hauptprobleme der Philosophie*, *Das Problem der Soziologie*, *Das Problem des Stiles*) and paradoxes: to these polarities, his own thinking provides a “third” way that demonstrates the underlying unity between the opposite poles and preserves the tension in all its vigor. The “third” does not however exist independently of dualism, as it manifests itself only in the relation between opposites, or becomes relativized into new dualisms in a never-ending process.

Although throughout the different phases of his thought Simmel maintained the (neo-Kantian) distinction between metaphysics, science, and theory of knowledge (*Erkenntnistheorie*) (Simmel, 1989a: 9; 1989b: 118; 1992a: 39-40; 1999: 29), his “metaphysical longing” emerges in different forms in his *oeuvre*, remarkably in the preface to his major work, *The Philosophy of Money*, in which he advocates for an original “third position” between art and philosophy (Simmel, 1989a: 12). The aesthetic sphere seemed the ideal grounding place for potential reconciliation of the aporia and the contradictions so rampant in the broader cultural context of the German *Gründerjahre*. Simmel turned his inquiry toward a new artistic style that could overcome the division between traditional art, by now autonomous, and the rationalized spheres of daily life. It is in this framework that Simmel’s undertaking to formulate a “sociological aesthetics” matured, as can be gleaned from his 1896 work of the same name (Simmel 1992b [1896]). At the beginning of the essay, Simmel clearly states the guiding principles of this aesthetic perspective:

For us the essence of aesthetic observation and interpretation lies in the fact that the typical is to be found in what is unique, the law-like in what is fortuitous, the essence and significance of

things in the superficial and transitory. It seems impossible from any phenomenon to escape this reduction to that which is significant and eternal. Even the lowest, intrinsically ugly phenomenon can be dissolved into contexts of color and form, of feeling and experience, which provide it with exciting significance. To involve ourselves deeply and lovingly with even the most common product, which would be banal and repulsive in its isolated appearance, enables us to conceive of it, too, as a ray and image of the final unity of all things from which beauty and meaning flow and for which every philosophy, every religion, every moment of our heightened emotional experience, searches for symbols which are appropriate for their expression. If we pursue this possibility of aesthetic appreciation to its final point, we find that there is no essential distinction between the amount of beauty in things. Our world view turns into an aesthetic pantheism. Every point contains within itself the potential of being redeemed to absolute aesthetic significance. To the adequately trained eye the *total* beauty, the *total* meaning of the world as a whole, radiates from every single point (Simmel, 1992 [1896]: 197).

The conception of sociological aesthetics that Simmel strives to outline here encompasses and inspires his most important sociologically oriented research: it is present not only in his interest in the forms of social interaction (defined programmatically two years earlier in the equally important writing *The Problem of Sociology*, 1894) and in monetary economics as an authentic paradigm of modernity, but also in his studies of the forms of “stylization” of everyday life such as fashion, sociability, coquetry, essays on female culture and psychology, adventure, forms of courtesy (such as shame and discretion), and the psychology of ornamentation. The essential conviction on which this perspective on the social world is based is that it is possible to extract the deep meaning of a historical and social era through analysis of its everyday aesthetic expressions, as they manifest themselves in the various forms of “crystallization” of objective culture (such as money or the various forms of

interaction). It thus leaves in the background the historical and “dialectical” analysis of society as a whole, favoring rather an “aesthetic” analysis that focuses on the spatial, temporal, and sensory dimensions of the cultural phenomenon in question. In fact, Simmel’s analysis is based on the concept of “objective culture” different from Hegel and Dilthey, deriving from the *Völkerpsychologie* (“Psychology of Peoples”) and draws upon the central theorem of Lazarus’s work, namely, the *Verdichtung des Lebens in der Geschichte* (“Condensation of Life in History”). Cultural artefacts created out of the contents of human experience can achieve their own objective existence in distinctive forms that may be temporary, but which may also persist over time in cultural traditions. The aesthetic mode of condensation or crystallization (*Verdichtung*) is already intimated in the concept itself, which can also be translated literally as “rendering into poetry (*Dichtung*)”, that is, the process of giving an aesthetic form to particular contents. Likewise, other spheres of human existence, such as the cognitive or moral spheres, may also be crystallized into independent forms that may persist over time. Interaction within these spheres can create autonomous and objective cultural forms or crystallizations. However, the coordination or reciprocal interaction between life and form, and between subjective and objective culture is itself seldom ‘perfected’. Indeed, the relation is viewed as conflictual, crisis-ridden and tragic, and, for Simmel, crucial to understanding “the tragedy of life”, which does not belong solely to modernity, but to human culture as such. According to his philosophy and sociology of culture in elaboration, the spirit of the city and the urban dimension represented adequate forms to express in an aesthetic language the exceptional richness and the extraordinary complexity of life. As we will see later, the historical Italian cities – like all objects considered through Simmel’s sociological aesthetics (*Bridge and Door, The Bend of the Vase, The Ruins, The Picture Frame*) – become those objects which undergo “the condensation of life in history” that Simmel, thanks to his essayistic virtuosity, manages to represent.

2. Rome, Venice, Florence

This same “sociological-aesthetic method” is also at work in the essays on historical cities that Simmel wrote over a short period of time during his repeated trips to Italy. According to Stéphane Jonas (Jonas, 1992: 166 ff.), the three essays on *Rome* (1898), *Florence* (1906) and *Venice* (1907) represent an aesthetic analysis in the sense of Dilthey’s aesthetic contemplation *Weltanschauung*, whereas the 1903 essay *The Metropolises and the Life of the Spirit* is a typically sociological and psychosociological essay. It can however be argued that this thesis underestimates the distinctness of the approach of Simmel, who – compared to Dilthey – consistently remains simultaneously aesthetic and sociological. In fact, Simmel’s analysis is based not only on Dilthey’s philosophy, but – as we have seen – also on the concept of objective culture deriving from the *Völkerpsychologie* (“Psychology of Peoples”), namely, the *Verdichtung des Lebens in der Geschichte* (“Condensation of Life in History”). Simmel’s writings on the historical Italian cities thus reveal a pluralistic approach that nonetheless rests on a common epistemological basis of his *metaphysische Sehnsucht* that would reach its climax in Simmel’s Strasbourg period, that is, toward the end of his life. The coexistence of past and present, construction and destruction, ruin and renewed architectural forms that characterize historical cities expresses in an exemplary manner the tragedy of culture, in the sense that in order to exist, continuous and incessant life must assume fixed and perishable forms, which in turn will be replaced by other successive forms.

Indeed, the 1898 essay on *Rome* gives the impression that his reflections on the eternal city are merely a pretext for describing the city in general as a work of art and transposing to the aesthetic field the concepts and approach that Simmel was developing for his sociology and his philosophy of culture:

Perhaps the most profound appeal of beauty lies in the fact that beauty always takes the form of elements that in themselves are indifferent and foreign to it, and that acquire their aesthetic value only from their proximity to one another. The particular word, colour fragment, building stone, or sound [Ton] are all lacking on their own. The essence of their beauty is what they form together, which envelops them like a gift that they do not deserve by themselves. Our perception of beauty as mysterious and gratuitous – something that reality actually cannot claim but must humbly accept as an act of grace – may be based on that aesthetic indifference of the world's atoms and elements in which the one is only beautiful in relation to the other, and vice versa, in such a way that beauty adheres to them together but not to any one of them individually (Simmel, 2007: 31).

Simmel suggests in this essay the idea that only great human works that meet the various needs of life can have aesthetic value. Rome is one of them:

Almost alone, old cities, in having grown without any preconceived design, provide aesthetic form to such content. Here, structures that originate from human purposes and appear only as the embodiment of mind and will [Geist und Willen] represent in coming together a value that lies entirely beyond these intentions while attaining through them a kind of *opus supererogationis* (ibid.).

At the heart of the essay on Rome lies the central idea of Simmel's sociology and philosophy of culture, namely the conflict – the tragedy – of modern culture. Here it is expressed in the opposition of aesthetic value between the part and the whole, a theme that recurs in various forms as in that of *Geist* (spirit) and *Verstand* (intellect), life and art, nature and culture. However, Rome, a historically exceptional city, seems to overcome this opposition because of the harmony and richness of its parts, as it is able to arrive at the totality through the spatial superimposition of the material and spiritual sediments of different epochs, and especially through time:

The fusion of the most different things into a unity that characterizes the spatial image of Rome's cityscape achieves an effect that is no less real in its temporal form. In a truly peculiar way that is difficult to describe, one can perceive here how the separateness of time-periods converges into a presentness and togetherness. One can find this notion expressed in the sentiment that in Rome the past appears to become the present, or vice versa: one seems to perceive the present in a dreamlike, meta-subjective way as if it were the past (ibid.: 33).

The tendency of the historical and landscape parts of the city to become autonomous from the unity of Rome, however, produces the conflict of modern culture, which is expressed here – before publication of his 1911 *Philosophical Culture* – in the opposition of form and life. In the last decade of his life this opposition would take on tragic overtones in Simmel and his aesthetic work – especially in his essay on Rembrandt (1916) – and become the great watershed, above and beyond which the principles of life and form will be organized.

The aesthetic essay on *Florence*, published eight years after that on *Rome* (in 1906) and three years after his sociological essay on *The Metropolises and the Life of the Spirit* (1903) – represents another important step in the development of Simmel's sociological aesthetics. Firstly, a certain continuity in Simmel's approach should be noted, for in this essay, too, he returns to the theme of conflict and the lost unity of form and life. Indeed, the fundamental question underlying the essay is whether in Florence – the cradle of the Italian Renaissance and heritage of European culture – it is possible to find the unity between nature and spirit lost in the forms of the modern metropolis.

Ever since that unified sense of life in antiquity was split into the poles of nature and mind [Geist], and existence perceived in its immediacy had discovered alienation and opposition in the world of the mind and interiority, a problem has emerged, the

awareness and attempted solution of which has preoccupied all of modernity: the problem of restoring this lost unity to both sides of life. Yet this only seems attainable in the work of art, where the form provided by nature reveals itself as the mind having come alive. The mind no longer stands behind what is naturally visible; rather, the elements become indivisibly one, as they were before the process of historical life had separated them (Simmel, 2007b [1906]: 38-39).

In the first part of the essay, Simmel gives the impression that he believes that Florence, as a city of art, is capable of recreating this unity through the artistic value omnipresent in its forms. The evocation of the historical grandeur of the ancient city-state, the description of the Arno valley and the hills of blissful Tuscany, the idyllic landscapes of cypresses and gardens, expressions of a refined urban culture, bring us into the atmosphere of that famous *Sehnsucht*, which even the young Goethe experienced during his trip to Italy. However, Florence and its community also has a tragic dimension in itself, in that the historical parts of landscape and time that present themselves to us, concentrated and superimposed, and that are part of a whole – that of the work of art *hic et nunc* – want to become an autonomous whole in themselves.

That one part of a whole should become a self-contained whole itself, emerging out of it and claiming from it a right to its own existence, this in itself may be the fundamental tragedy of spirit. This condition came into its own in modernity and assumed the leading role in the processes of culturalization. Underlying the plurality of relationships that interconnect individuals, groups and social formations, there is a pervading dualism confronting us: the individual entity strives towards wholeness, while its place within the larger whole only accords it the role of a part. We are aware of being centred both externally and internally because we, together with our actions, are mere constituents of larger wholes that place demands upon us as one-dimensional parts in the division of labour. Yet, we nevertheless want to be rounded and self-determining beings, and establish ourselves as such (Simmel, 2007a [1913]: 22).

In the quest for reconstitution of the lost unity of Antiquity, post-Renaissance European civilization has so fostered the development of the spirit that the work of art – here represented by the city of Florence – will be exaggerated and so finished, accomplished as an individualized work, that it will no longer seem to satisfy the mind. And, as a result, what at first was only a tragic tension becomes the tragedy of culture: the spirit remains unsatisfied, because the continuous current of life seems to be frozen in historical epochs – certainly glorious but closed.

Since in this case the form of culture covers all of nature, and since every step on these grounds touches upon the history of the mind that is indissolubly wedded to it, the needs which nature alone can satisfy in its original being remain unfulfilled, beyond any extension in the mind. The inner boundaries of Florence are the boundaries of art. Florence is not a piece of earth on which to prostrate oneself in order to feel the heartbeat of existence with its dark warmth, its unformed strength, in the way that we can sense it in the forests of Germany, at the ocean, and even in the flower gardens of some anonymous small town. That is why Florence offers us no foundation in epochs in which one might want to start all over again and to encounter the sources of life once more, when one must orient oneself within those confusions of the soul to an entirely original existence. Florence is the good fortune of those fully mature human beings who have achieved or renounced what is essential in life, and who for this possession or renunciation are seeking only its form (Simmel, 2007b [1906]: 41).

The question that remains is this: why does Simmel feel a contradictory aesthetic feeling when faced with a city of art such as Florence that represents Renaissance perfection? Why does the aesthetic beauty of its landscapes, architecture and history make him think of the dark forests of Germany?

If we look at this essay from the visual angle of the *Concept and Tragedy of Culture* – as Jonas (1992: 173) suggests – where Simmel

clearly expresses his aesthetic and metaphysical sentiment that the life of the spirit continually generates the constructed material forms that constantly threaten to engulf it, then the Italian city of art becomes the most eminent and contradictory symbol of where the danger of death of urban civilization is felt, that is, in a civilization of the division of labor and artifact, a technological society that aspires to the perfection of the life of the spirit by defying nature.

The fact is that, unlike animals, humanity does not integrate itself unquestioningly into the natural facticity of the world but tears loose from it, confronts it, demanding, struggling, violating and being violated by it and it is with this first great dualism that the endless process between the subject and the object arises. It finds its second stage within the spirit itself. The spirit produces countless constructs which continue to exist in a peculiar autonomy, independent of the soul that created them as well as of any of the others that accept or reject them (Simmel, 1997 [1911]: 55).

Lastly, the aesthetic essay on *Venice* was written in 1906, this time only a few months after the *Florence* essay, and on close inspection the two turn out to be internally related one to the other. In *Venice* as well the dominant theme is the concept of the tragedy of culture, that is, the impossibility for modern man to reconcile spirit and nature, form and life, in his creations. However, what still seemed possible to reconcile in Florence is no longer possible in Venice. As Cacciari pointed out, with the image of Venice, the philosophical-aesthetic categories that were meant to encompass Rome, that is, the whole Mediterranean as opposed to the Nordic symbolism, “go down” (Cacciari 1973: 89). If Florence is a harmonious interpenetration of nature and culture, organicity and artificiality, interiority and exteriority, Venice is decisively opposed to it. Venetian architecture, and the urban conformation of the city are traced by Simmel to a constellation of concepts that refer to each other under an unequivocally negative aura: play, veil, mask, artifice, stage, reverie.

Perhaps here is the most profound difference between Venice's architecture and that of Florence. In the palaces of Florence, and of Tuscany as a whole, we perceive the outside as the exact expression of its inner meaning, like a defiant, fortress-like, serious or magnificent unfolding of power that can be sensed in every stone, each one representing a self-assured, self-responsible personality. By contrast, Venetian palaces are a precious game, their uniformity masking the individual characteristics of their people, a veil whose folds follow only the laws of its inner beauty, betraying the life behind it in the act of concealing it (Simmel, 2007c [1906]: 43).

Venice, a singular city at the edge of the historical Western European city, situated between land and water, becomes the symbol of the tragedy of culture, of the finished human work, with its frozen forms, against which the current of life has broken.

Florence appears as a work of art because its characteristic image is bound up with an ideal true inner life, even if that life has historically disappeared. Venice, however, is the artificial city. Florence can never turn into a mere mask since its appearance was the undistorted language of true life. But in Venice, where all that is cheerful and bright, free and light, has only served as a face for a life that is dark, violent and unrelentingly functional, the city's decline has left behind a merely lifeless stage-set, the mendacious beauty of the mask. All people in Venice walk as if across a stage (ibid.: 43-44).

In this essay we can find a foretaste of Simmel's critical works – sociological and aesthetic – devoted to naturalism, which for him is *not* a typical expression – along with conformism – of the conventional conception of art (Jonas, 1992: 174), but an occasion to reflect on the aesthetic notion of truth in art. For Simmel, Venice lacks truth not because it is unauthentic, but because it is too subject to external forces, thus conditioning the soul.

Above and beyond any naturalistic principle that imposes the law of external things onto art is a claim to truth which the work of art has to fulfil, although such a claim must come only from itself. When mighty beams rest on pillars that we do not entrust with such a task, when a poem's words of pathos instruct us in a passion and depth which the whole does not convince us of, then we sense a lack of a truth, a lack of agreement between a work of art and its own idea. In addition, the work of art is confronted with the decision between truth and falsehood, since it belongs to an overall context of being (ibid.: 42-43).

Further:

Only an appearance which has never corresponded to some being, and even whose opposite has died away and yet which pretends to offer life and wholeness, is simply a lie in which the ambivalence of life has coagulated, as in a body. Ambivalent is the character of these places: with their lack of vehicles, their narrow, symmetrical enclosure assumes the look of a room. Ambivalent is the relentless crowding and contact of people in the narrow alleyways that invest this life with a sense of familiarity and 'cosiness [*Gemütlichkeit*]', but in the absence of any intimacy [*Gemüt*]. Ambivalent is the double-life of the city, here in the connection of its alleyways, there in the connection of its canals, so that the city belongs neither to land nor to water (ibid.: 45).

Simmel concludes with an association between Venice and a key figure of his philosophical and aesthetical thought, the adventure, which here surprisingly assumes a negative aspect:

Venice, however, has the ambivalent beauty of an adventure that is immersed in a life without roots, like a blossom floating in the sea. That Venice was and remains the classical city of adventure is only a sign [*Versinnlichung*] of the final fate of its overall image, offering our soul no home but only an adventure" (ibid.: 45-46).

Few commentators – with some exceptions, as we will discuss later – have noted the fact that Simmel seems to describe the

character of Venice almost exclusively negatively while it is known that adventure is his model of philosophy and a significant trait of the modern. Simmel's ire against Venice (and his predilection for Florence) can therefore be explained in this context, where Venice is a game that has lost touch with life, an isolated adventure lost in the sea. Like *l'art pour l'art* – to which Simmel dedicated a late essay (1914) – Venice is criticized for its separation from life. As Jonas writes, “in Simmel's aesthetic journey to Italy”, Venice becomes “the brutal term and end of romantic nostalgia”; it thus represents “a scission between inside and outside, nature and spirit, the loss of the roots of being, like a singular city that is no longer on the water and no longer on the land; an art city of the old historical Europe that has lost a certain sense of life” (Jonas, 1992: 175). Rome and Florence represent the organismic cities that can satisfy the demands of aesthetic fidelity to inner life, the opposite of the “intensification of nervous life” and the dominance of intellectual life over affective life typical of the modern metropolis. Venice, on the contrary, represents the tragic limit of that urban model, the form that has autonomized and become unfaithful to life, like the seduction that is generated by adventure. Indeed, the model of “classical” underlying Simmel's discourse emerges clearly from these writings on Italian cities: the classical is the coherence between life and form, the harmonious and established concordance between the parts that combine to form an organic whole, culture as the normativity of individual law, the reconciliation of form and function, idea and phenomenon, memory and project. Therefore, while Rome and Florence appear in Simmel's eyes as the cities which have preserved their classicism – understood as Goethean organic totality, aesthetic unity of life and form, spirit and nature, interiority and exteriority, the ideal contemporaneity of temporal ecstasies –, the urban structure and architecture of Venice represents the tragic character of this torn totality and the autonomy of the parts that have differentiated from each other. Venice is disharmonious and unfinished because in its appearance

emancipates itself from reality, becomes pure simulacrum, flaunting a separation from being. The three essays on Rome, Florence and Venice thus represent a certain conceptual “coquetry” with the metaphysical *Sehnsucht* that oscillates from nostalgia to a resigned acceptance of the tragedy of culture, that is, the impossibility for man to regain the lost unity of nature and spirit, form and life.

3. The Persistence of Tragedy

Are “his essays on Italian cities... much more characteristic of his thought in general and of his attitude toward the question of urbanity, than his statements on the modern metropolis” (Podoksik, 2012: 103)? In a noteworthy article on historic Italian cities, Erfrain Podoksik attempts to interpret essays on historic Italian cities in light of the classicist concept of *Bildung* and the search for unity³: “my reading of Simmel is that his essays on Italian cities are much more characteristic of his thought in general and of his attitude to the question of urbanity, than his statements on the modern metropolis; that his diagnosis of modern ‘fragmentation’, instead of signifying his cultural immersion in the ‘modernist’ experience, points rather to his detachment from it and to his search for alternatives” (Podoksik 2012: 103). For Podoksik the text of *Venice* makes it clear that Simmel disliked precisely that feature of Venice which was the essence of modernity: its aesthetic superficiality. “Instead of immersing himself in the flux, Simmel was desperately looking for something solid to get hold in the condition of modernity” (ibid.: 107). Podoksik even prefigures a possible Simmel nostalgia for Hegelian synthesis: the Italian cities would stand for Simmel like the Greek polis for Hegel. If we choose to answer to the question asked by Podoksik with reference to Simmel’s fragment of the *Nachlass* on the *metaphysische Sehnsucht*, then we have to carefully distinguish Simmel’s “metaphysics as life and function” from Hegel’s dialectics. Now, it is true that such a

³ Köhnke correctly showed the differences between Simmel’s and Hegel’s concept of objective culture and *Bildung* (pp. 349-50).

shrewd thinker as Simmel could not have failed to engage with Hegelian thought, although it appears mentioned very little in his works, as indeed do many other thinkers that play an important role (like Spinoza). An 1896 writing on *The Women's Congress and Social Democracy* (Simmel 1997e) provided Simmel with an opportunity to express his personal opinion on a neuralgic issue, hotly disputed at the time and still the focus of debate on the left to this day: the question of precisely of how to realize the ideals of socialism. On this occasion he mentions interestingly Hegel:

Yet just as the shibboleth of Hegelian philosophy has been replaced by the patient work of garnering knowledge from the individual elements of the world, whose gradual constellation can first solve the riddle of the totality, so the unitary formula of socialism can be replaced by practical work upon the individual aspects of social conditions as if it were deduction replaced by induction in order that, in this way, the whole might grow together from the sum of the parts. (p. 271)

Here Simmel's skepticism about the claim of Hegel's metaphysics to arrive at knowledge – albeit gradual – of the totality is quite clear. A further moment where Simmel confronts Hegel from the volume *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* ("The Main Problems of Philosophy") that Simmel published two years after *Soziologie*, in 1910. Here Simmel for the first time takes a stand on the philosophical tradition as a whole, after partial studies devoted to Kant and Goethe, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Dwelling on the concept of becoming, Simmel credits Heraclitus with introducing the concept into Greek philosophy and Hegel with giving its most comprehensive formulation in his dialectic. But Hegel, who had also provided German culture with the essential grammar for understanding historical becoming, could not satisfy the need for a plural representation of the world. Not only is the thesis-antithesis-synthesis movement too mechanistic, but the idea that the essence of becoming, the Spirit, is realized at some point in the end of the

historical process is aporetic: a teleological becoming can only be conceived eschatologically, as the end of the world, but not in the world. For Simmel, as he had pointed out since his studies in *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, this is the difficulty of any philosophy of becoming: “if they are wholly true and therefore referable even to themselves, they cannot be wholly true, but must have above them a higher degree of knowledge” (Simmel, 1996 [1910]: 77). This higher degree of knowledge would bring us back into the “metaphysics as dogma” from which, as we have seen, Simmel intended to take leave. However, it is safe to say that the most characteristic aspects of dialectical thought definitely do not appear in Simmel, in particular his unquestionable foreignness to the Hegelian philosophy of history as becoming through contradictions (thus progressive, processual, teleological, eschatological). More generally, Simmel’s thought – as Adorno never ceases to point out – can be said to lack the idea of the “broken” and “antagonistic” character of objectivity. A fundamental principle of dialectics – which grounds the essential historicity of knowing – is that the generality and necessity of the object are identified with the laws of historical transformation⁴.

The distance between Simmel and Hegel was also the focus of the reflection of Theodor Adorno, a commentator who devoted all his intellectual energies to the Hegelian dialectic, and to a possible reformulation of it in a “negative” key. Adorno had – at first – given a very harsh judgment of Simmel’s metaphysics and its intellectual achievements. In a portrait dedicated to Walter Benjamin, Adorno sustains the superiority of Benjamin’s concept of history and historiographical practice because this was directed “at the construction of constellations of historical entities which do not remain simply interchangeable examples for ideas but which in their

⁴ This is why new and traditional interpretations of Simmel as a “dialectician” are not convincing: Christian (1978), Vandenberghe (1995), Schermer and Jary (2013).

uniqueness constitute the ideas themselves as historical” (Adorno, 1997: 231). Simmel, on the contrary, merely pursues an “innocuous illustration of concepts through colorful historical objects [...] when he depicted his primitive metaphysics of form and life in the cup-handle, the actor, Venice” (ibid.). The central point of Adorno’s critique of Simmel is the inability to “lose oneself in the thing”, that is, to deprive oneself of the protections with which traditional thought provides the subject in his cognitive journey to go to meet the “thing in itself”, the absolute. If, with Kant, philosophy had declared beyond its reach, the “in itself” can still be captured in the form of tension between subject and object, of mutual irreducibility, deep vibration between two irreconcilable elements. According to the author of the *Negative Dialectic*, it is precisely from the collision between thought and thing the dialectic draws its critical and negative force; it is able to identify the absolute as what is radically other, the insoluble around which the concrete grows and is stratified. The dialectical thought, of which Adorno declares himself the bearer, believes in a recovery, so to speak, *in extremis* of a critical tension in things that derives from the irruption of that which is the fruit of historical human praxis. From this perspective, Adorno liquidates Simmel as an innocuous collector of *objets d’art*, who remains bound to a conventional and contemplative conception of art.

This judgment is overly ungenerous, and Adorno himself will rectify it when he acknowledges Simmel as the creator of the essay form. “If we reacted so strongly against Simmel at one time, it was only because he withheld from us the very thing which he enticed us” to him, he remarked (Adorno, 1992: 213). In fact, Adorno espouses virtually all the characteristics of the “playful form of knowledge” formulated by Simmel with coquetry. The essay as form of writing is a truly original approach to reality, which renounces the stringent methodicalness of the scientific treatise to be based rather on aesthetic preferences, on “what you love and hate”. For this reason, instead of “a boundless work ethic”, “luck

and play are essential to the essay” (Adorno, 1984: 152). The essay, by its very makeup, “shys away from the violence of dogma” (ibid.: 158), renounces the claim to embrace reality in its totality, but arranges itself starting from a fragment, from a single phenomenon, which it tries to propose as key to interpreting not so much a law, as a wider tendency. Unlike the “philosophical system” or the “scientific treatise”, it renounces any claim to traditional methodicalness and scientificity, which are exercised primarily through classification. From the expository form of the essay Adorno developed “the pleasure of freedom vis-à-vis the object, freedom that gives the object more of itself than if it were mercilessly incorporated into the order of ideas” (ibid.: 168). The open structure of the essay, its being an experimental form, a test, an “attempt”, make it a genre absolutely suitable to the sensibility of the twentieth-century metropolis, also because it is, so to speak, transverse to literature and philosophy: the essay does not have the task of theorizing or defining objectively, but rather of opening up to the understanding of a new object. It is precisely its experimental nature that allows the object of reflection to be “tried”, “tested”, and consequently transformed and renewed.

The model of critical theory represented by Adorno, however, tends to dissolve dimensions of the subject-object relationship not entirely ascribable to the dialecticization of the antinomies and of the dualism of reality. Thinkers close to this project, such as Bloch, Kracauer and Benjamin had presented correctives to that model. It is not by chance that we have taken inspiration from Simmel, according to whom reality and meaning are also given in terms of possibility and functional differentiation, in the space of separation and otherness of things respect to the subject, in their state of suspension and openness. Objects for Simmel are not reducible to pure “allegories” (or “symptoms”) according to the style of normative, critical-dialectical thinking, but rather maintain a sensible evidence, a “visibility” that is all the more real and objective the more it is constructed, it is the result of their quality as cultural objects, in which history, psyche, nature have been elaborated in

symbolic, metaphorical form. Simmelian “playful form of knowledge” therefore does not represent a relativistic dissolution of the idea of truth and an aimless pilgrimage into the world of phenomenal reality, but rather the construction of a “landscape of perception” (Boella, 1988; Rammstedt 2008)⁵, which represents a decisive and original step toward knowledge of the “individual law” of the object, according to the Goethean ideal of the *Urphänomen* that intuits the life of form in the sensible reality of phenomena.

Therefore, it can be stated that Simmel's sociological aesthetics is characterized by what later – in another philosophical context – would be called the “world disclosure function of language” (Harrington, 2005; Lehtonen, Turo-Kimmo; Pyyhtinen, 2008). “World-disclosure,” a term drawn from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, indicates the revealing of contexts of existential inter-relatedness among things in the world – a revealing that imparts truth in the sense of total holistic illumination. Insofar as such world-disclosure is held by Heidegger to refuse any agency of rational critique and simply said to “happen” as an ontological “event” in which language speaks above the heads of individuals, it is a dangerous philosophical confection whose obscurantism Adorno was right to expose (Adorno, 1973). But if we can define this idea as a dimension of semantic aesthetic plenitude in language-use, capable of opening up novel horizons of perceptual orientation in the world that at the same time depend on and enrich problem-solving attitudes to language, it must be concluded that it has been undeservedly neglected by pragmatist and rationalist philosophies. Simmel's sociological aesthetics, his phenomenological description of the effects of rationalization in everyday life would influence the

⁵ As Rammstedt observed “Simmel's approach allows freeing the [object] from the binarity of subject/object, by taking out... the thing as object of things, to detach it from it and to give it back the quality of the thing among things. It is thus that the object becomes dependent on the decision of the individual” (Rammstedt, 2008: 17).

analyses of later Marxist *Kulturkritikers*. Unlike these theorists, however, Simmel would always maintain a certain distrust of any philosophy of history. He, in the wake of the radical skepticism of Nietzsche, rejects the idea of an already presupposed unity of history, society, the subject. Abandoning progress as an explanatory category even of the theory of historical and social knowledge, he frees himself from the need to explain the social and cultural changes between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in terms of continuity and historical unity, opting for the “aesthetic perspective” based on the apparently insignificant fragments of reality. Simmel’s sociology, unlike that of the other subsequent critics of culture (including, as we have seen, Adorno), is intended to distinguish itself clearly from the philosophy of history. This is therefore a fundamental characteristic of the aesthetic perspective on social reality: it is not interpreted in terms of further development or progress, but on the basis of its own self-sufficiency and its own value.

It rather appears that the theme of the tragic – as we have seen – accompanies all of Simmel’s work from its origins and that the answer to this question is found in Simmel’s extensive research and will only reap partial answers, variations on a theme that will never be truly completed or exhausted. In the following, the themes addressed in Simmel’s aesthetic research will be made more explicit through his essays on the painting and sculpture of Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Rodin. Nonetheless, the three essays on historic Italian cities remain a significant milestone in the elaboration of Simmel’s sociological aesthetics.

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