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*Italian Triangulations: R. G. Collingwood and his Italian
Colleagues*

Rik Peters, *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de
Ruggiero and Collingwood*, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2014

Introduction

This book is both welcome and timely. I should say at the outset that it is a magnificent piece of scholarship, well worth reading by anyone with any degree of serious interest in the Italian neo-Idealists and Collingwood. I don't mean, of course that it is blemish-free or that one cannot disagree with parts of it; but I do mean that I know of nothing comparable which systematically draws together the thought of these thinkers and considers them in their mutual relations.¹ This book has been needed for decades. Following its publication, commentators on Collingwood and the Italian idealists no longer have any excuse for ignorance concerning the intellectual relationship between the thinkers it discusses.

The thought of Giovanni Gentile is returning, if not into fashion, at least into the world of serious discussion and attention.² Benedetto Croce has always found an audience over the years, although the location of that audience has moved around the disciplines somewhat. De Ruggiero has largely been forgotten,

¹ Proof reading could have been better and there are a large number of typographical errors.

² See, for example, J. Wakefield, *Giovanni Gentile and the State of Contemporary Constructivism* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2015), and B. Haddock and J. Wakefield (eds.), *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2015).

other than by specialists in Italian thought and philosophy: but his *History of European Liberalism*³ retains a readership and there are welcome signs of renewed interest in his thought. Collingwood has always held an audience, or, to be more exact, a number of distinct audiences in aesthetics, philosophy of history, philosophical method and metaphysics, and the archaeology of Roman Britain. This is an important point, because his very polymathy sometimes leads to fragmented interpretations of his thought. One aspect of his thought that has not been properly understood or appreciated is his debt to, and interactions with, his Italian colleagues Croce, Gentile and de Ruggiero. I do not mean that this relationship has gone unnoticed; I mean that where it has been noticed, it has rarely been systematically addressed by academics with a comprehensive and detailed knowledge not only of his own thought but also, in Italian, of his interlocutors.⁴ Hence Peters rightly states that studies of the relations between these philosophers have been hampered because those who knew Collingwood knew Croce to a lesser degree, Gentile still less and de Ruggiero not at all – especially in the original Italian. Peters is uniquely placed to plug the gap here – to join together and explain a tradition of thought which has remained hidden precisely because it was inter-continental and inter-language.

Don't Mention the Italians: On Influence

³ English translation by R.G. Collingwood (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927).

⁴ I personally embody this lack: although I have discussed the relationship between Collingwood and the Italians I do not possess the knowledge of the Italian originals to be able to do so with authority. See, for example, 'Art Thou the Man? Croce, Gentile or De Ruggiero', in D. Boucher, J. Connelly and T. Modood (eds.) *Philosophy, History and Civilization: Essays on R.G. Collingwood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995).

Collingwood, notoriously, did not often mention his Italian colleagues in print, and some have concluded (falsely in my view) that he sought to conceal their influence. For an example, H. S. Harris, writes that:

‘Collingwood maintains absolute silence about Italian influences upon his thought in his Autobiography, and even represents his personal friend and immediate predecessor as Professor of Metaphysics, J. A. Smith, as an idealist of the “old school.” This fact seems to me to invalidate any hypothesis that would exonerate him from a charge of deliberate concealment.’⁵

This is a serious charge and this is not the place to seek to dispel it in its entirety. I shall simply remark that, at least in private, Collingwood was more forthcoming on the issue and also astute in recognising that influence and affinities are difficult things to pin down. Here I cite a recently discovered letter written to his friend J. A. Smith in which he wrote, on sending him a copy of his British Academy lecture on ‘Human Nature and Human History’:

‘My Dear J. A. How much of this paper I owe to you, how much to masters we both acknowledge, and how much to the light of nature, I cannot say. But I am sure that with you it will receive a kindly welcome and, in parts at least, a measure of agreement: so the first copy I send out goes to your address.’⁶

⁵ H.S. Harris, Introduction to G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), 15.

⁶ R. G. Collingwood to J.A. Smith, 9th October 1936. I am indebted to F. Michael Walsh of Toronto for drawing my attention to this letter.

But notice that even here he does not feel the need to *name* Croce, Gentile and De Ruggiero – there is no need to do so and, further, his point seems to be that it is not the input into his thinking that matter so much as the quality and character of the output. More generally we might add that it is unfair on any author to seek to reduce him or her to their ‘influences’; Collingwood himself wrote perceptively of ‘that frivolous and superficial type of history which speaks of ‘influences’ and ‘borrowings’ and so forth, and when it says that A is influenced by B or that A borrows from B never asks itself what there was in A that laid it open to B’s influence, or what there was in A which made it capable of borrowing from B’.⁷ I would suggest that the best image should be that of a dialogue in which thinkers are both created by their influences and also create those influences (or at least determines what those influences might be). It is the great merit of this book that Peters presents the relation between the four thinkers as an overlapping set of dialogues, not as a simple matter of influence and being influenced.

I have deliberately used the term ‘colleagues’. There were, of course, influences; but there were also affinities, criticisms, rejections, and questions. In Collingwood’s case I concur with Peters’s remark that ‘Italian philosophy raised many of Collingwood’s questions, but his answers were definitely his own’: but I would apply this comment to each philosopher.⁸ In short, there was a vibrant intellectual relationship between the four thinkers discussed in this book, and such a relationship cannot be reduced to a single notion of influence or to the conflation of positions as we have so often seen in discussions in the philosophy

⁷ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 129.

⁸ R. Peters, *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2014), 397.

of art or history in which people write glibly of the 'Croce-Collingwood' view or some such.

The philosophy of history has moved on enormously since the publication of Collingwood's *The Idea of History* in 1946. But progress, especially in philosophy, is a tricky notion, as Collingwood himself knew, and progress does not preclude return to that influential work. In fact there is a cycling process of constant return and reference to Collingwood, who established a core agenda for the philosophy of history and the history of ideas. It therefore makes sense to consider Collingwood's views while not necessarily being committed to them as the last word. *British Idealist Studies*, the series in which this book is published, currently contains six books on Collingwood.⁹ Of these six, four are explicitly concerned with the philosophy of history, and the other two largely focus on the closely related concept of civilisation. This is only one sample, but it is indicative and shows that Collingwood's philosophy of history is still seen as central to his philosophical contribution and worthy of critical discussion and analysis.

So there is a good reason to study Collingwood. Is there equally good reason to study Collingwood's influences, affinities and dialogues with his contemporaries? Clearly, we might respond in Collingwoodian vein, there is if such a discussion sheds light on his philosophical claims through identifying the targets he was addressing and the questions he was seeking to answer. And even more so when those influences and affinities derive from interactions with

⁹ S. Leach, *The Foundations of History: Collingwood's Analysis of Historical Explanation*, 2009; S. Helgeby, *Action as History: The Historical Thought of R.G. Collingwood*, 2004; M. Hughes-Warrington, *How Good an Historian Shall I Be? R.G. Collingwood, the Historical Imagination and Education*, 2004; R. Murphy, *Collingwood and the Crisis of Western Civilisation: Art, Metaphysics and Dialectic*, 2008; J. Connelly, *Metaphysics, Method and Politics: The Political Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood*, 2003.

Croce, Gentile and de Ruggiero, who (especially Croce) are such important figures in the philosophy of history.

One of the key organising features of this book is the contrast between the living past and the dead past, and how a conception of a living past was developed, asserted or denied by its protagonists. It is concerned with the past and how to recover it, with historical thought in relation to the present, and in relation to practice. At the same time, this expository device is an illustration not only of the thought of the four philosophical colleagues, but also of the way in which we, from our vantage point, can or should appreciate their thought. In other words, the issue is what is living in the thought of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood. Peters organises his exposition thus:

Introduction: The Dead Past?

1. Early development of Croce and Gentile
2. Croce's middle development and his system
3. Gentile's middle development and his system
4. Guido de Ruggiero's early development
5. Collingwood's early development
6. Croce, Gentile and de Ruggiero in the 1920s
7. Collingwood's middle development
8. The later development of the Italians
9. Collingwood's later development
10. Collingwood's system

Conclusion: the living past

This method of exposition makes for completeness and thoroughness; it also makes for constant cross-referencing on the part of the reader. It has to be admitted that Peters presents himself with a difficult task of exposition and exegesis: a four way relationship developing over time, with mutual interactions is not going to be easy to exhibit clearly and coherently. This is therefore a book not to be devoured in a single hungry sitting, with course following course from soup to nuts, but in several sittings in which mezes and tapas compete for attention as one moves back and forth between different dishes and builds them into a satisfactory meal. This is not to object to Peters's manner of proceeding, but merely to point out that he rightly understands that to do a proper job with the material it has to be presented in a complex cross-cutting fashion and the reader has to be prepared to consume it in Greek or Spanish style.

In the following discussion I make no attempt to provide a systematic account or critique of Peters's book; rather I shall draw attention to some features which strike me as of particular interest and also make some links to, and discuss, some topics in the philosophy of history to which Collingwood's contribution still remains to be properly appreciated or understood.

Collingwood and Guido De Ruggiero

The authors discussed by Peters were all in their own different but related ways seeking to show how different forms of experience are related to each other. This is why it is imperative to understand their thought on history in relation to their views on logic, metaphysics, aesthetics or ethics. In this sense they were all anti-positivists, being interested in exploring the different forms of understanding in their own terms as well as in relation to each other, without a presumption that

there was a single master discipline, natural science, purportedly providing the master blueprint for all forms of knowledge.

For me one of the considerable merits of the book is to show precisely how close Collingwood was to de Ruggiero. He obviously learnt much from Gentile and Croce, but with de Ruggiero there was a distinctive sense that they formed a duo in mutual learning and joint criticism of their elders, Croce and Gentile. Collingwood's thought resonated with de Ruggiero's insistence on the unity of the spirit in contrast to Croce who tended to emphasize the distinction of forms of experience and neglect their underlying unity or Gentile's tendency to resolve everything into the individual act of thinking, the *pensiero pensante*. Collingwood and de Ruggiero sought to develop a dynamic account of the forms of experience in their development and interaction. Peters notes that:

The starting point of the new philosophy is Croce's theory of the distinct forms of the spirit. Croce designed his theory in order to vindicate the autonomy of the different forms of experience. de Ruggiero endorses this claim for autonomy, but he points out that the forms must be fused into a new unity.¹⁰

In contrast to both Gentile and Croce, de Ruggiero offers a pluralistic interpretation of actualism, and this is essentially Collingwood's position, as found in *Speculum Mentis* and elsewhere, in which he sought to give full measure to each form of experience, asserting both their identity and their difference. For Collingwood this was expressed through the logic of overlapping classes and the

¹⁰ Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 99.

idea of a scale of forms as expounded in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*.¹¹

Another point of agreement, important when one considers *the Principles of Art*, which is as much a discussion of ethics as it is of aesthetics, can be seen in Collingwood's insistence on the unity of theory and practice and the life of each form of experience within that unity. Such a view was adumbrated by de Ruggiero when he remarks that 'The merit of an artist does not lie in the effort which he makes in order to express himself as clear as possible, but in the effort which he makes in order to make himself more truly man.'¹² And Collingwood was in resounding agreement with the broader claim that:

all forms of the spirit are self-conscious activities. From this follows de Ruggiero's conclusion that there is no formal distinction between the forms of the spirit; art, religion, science, history, philosophy and action are all forms of self-conscious activity, or in his own terminology; all forms of the spirit are philosophical.¹³

One of the besetting problems of Collingwood interpretation has been the lack of attention paid to his insistence on the unity of the spirit and, directly related, a failure to recognise the distinction between professions and forms of experience as constitutive of every person's conscious life. We are all artists, historians, scientists, historians and philosophers, and each activity is related to and feeds into each other; for example, we are artists in our use of imagery, language and expression or philosophers in so far as we become self critical and seek out the presuppositions of the forms of experience in which we engage. We might also happen to be professional artists, scientists or philosophers, but there is no

¹¹ R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933; second edition with additional material, J. Connelly and J. D'Oro (eds), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

¹² In Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 178.

¹³ Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 177.

necessary coincidence between professional boundaries and the boundaries of forms of experience in the philosophical sense.

Theory and Practice: Fascism

One of the key issues facing the Italians and their English sympathisers was the rise of fascism, its political consequences, and the split this caused between Gentile on the one side and de Ruggiero and Croce on the other. There are two issues here. The first is whether, given an insistence of the unity of theory and practice, a flawed philosophy led necessarily to fascism. The second is whether a philosophy of history can or should speak to the rise of fascism, as an historical product, and thereby generate ways of responding to its rise. It is certainly the case that the philosophers' differing theoretical and practical attitudes towards fascism led to much soul searching about the both the content of their philosophy and claims concerning the unity of theory and practice. Collingwood went so far as to say that if a philosopher became a fascist that was the end of him as a philosopher: 'There was once a very able and distinguished philosopher who was converted to Fascism. As a philosopher, that was the end of him. No one could embrace a creed so fundamentally muddle-headed and remain capable of clear thinking.'¹⁴ Collingwood was clearly uncomfortable with the fact of Gentile's fascism. However, considering that his relationship with Gentile was far more remote than his relationship with Croce and de Ruggiero, whose work he had translated and whom he often met and corresponded with, it might be of interest to briefly consider one of the sources of his knowledge of Gentile's fascism in relation to philosophy. Aline Lion receives no mention in this book,

¹⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 158.

which, philosophically, is appropriate; but historically and biographically she is worth a few remarks.

Aline Lion was a Frenchwoman who lived in Italy from 1913 to 1926, where she studied with Gentile, whose *Theoria generale* she translated into French.¹⁵ She moved to Oxford in 1926 to write a doctoral thesis on Gentile's philosophy of religion under the guidance of J.A. Smith.¹⁶ While in Rome she met Mussolini and was deeply and favourably impressed by him. In early 1927 she published an article on 'Fascism: What it Believes in and Aims At', closely followed by her book *The Pedigree of Fascism*.¹⁷ Despite an opening disclaimer, she was palpably sympathetic both to Gentile and to Mussolini, who she regarded as the embodiment of Gentile's philosophy. Her disclaimer ran:

I should, perhaps, say from the first that I am neither Italian nor Fascist. Yet, having lived in Italy from 1913 to 1927, I cannot but be conscious of the fact that the country has undergone a deep change, and have come to the conclusion that it is a change for the better. My purpose in writing this book has been to bring to the knowledge of people possessed of a fair amount of general knowledge, the conclusions that might be formed by a specialist with regard to this change and the value of it. Incidentally I have endeavoured to discourage both those who would import Fascism, as it

¹⁵ *L'Esprit Acte Pur*. G. Gentile, translated by A. Lion (Paris, Felix Alcan, 1925).

¹⁶ Published as *The Idealistic Conception of Religion, Vico, Hegel, Gentile* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932). Collingwood steered the book through the press from initial submission in 1929.

¹⁷ A. Lion, 'Fascism: what it Believes in and Aims at', *Hibbert Journal*, 25 (1927), 208-28; A. Lion, *The Pedigree of Fascism* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1927).

flourishes in Italy, into other countries, and those who would hinder the spread of that philosophy which, I hold, is its basis.¹⁸

The 'pedigree' of fascism was apparently impressive, going back to Vico and culminating in Croce, Gentile and Mussolini. Mussolini is treated both as politician and as philosopher: Lion firmly maintains the view, also attributed to Mussolini, that there was a clear connection between his politics and Italian Idealism and that 'he could not conceive how people could doubt that fact unless they were idiots.'¹⁹

Her account of Mussolini and Fascism was enthusiastic, almost fanatical. She wrote that 'If "Avanti" was not the motto of Socialism the Fascists could make it theirs; as it is, reintroducing faith and belief at the basis of man's life they seem to point to higher moral, political and economical conquests. The only motto that can benefit the black shirts movement is therefore *Sursum corda*.'²⁰

Lion deserves to be taken seriously both because she had an influential readership,²¹ and was also one of Collingwood's sources for his knowledge of fascism. She provided a direct line to Gentile and, ultimately, to Mussolini. On the one side were his friends Croce and de Ruggiero, staunch anti-fascists; on the other side Lion, who represented Mussolini as the embodiment of Gentile's philosophy. For her, Gentile's philosophy simply *was* the philosophy of Fascism: in so far as he accepted this view, Collingwood was bound to have a very uneasy relationship with Gentile. Had he not believed in a strong relation between

¹⁸ *The Pedigree of Fascism*, 'Author's note'; she also thanks Smith, Collingwood and C.C.J. Webb for their help.

¹⁹ Lion, 'Fascism', 213.

²⁰ Lion, *The Pedigree of Fascism*, 234.

²¹ Including T.S. Eliot, who included her book in 'The Literature of Fascism', *The Criterion*, 8 (Dec. 1928), 280-90. He later wrote an approving reference for her. T.S. Eliot, *Letters, Vol. 4, 1928-9* (London: Faber, 2013): 177.

theory and practice he could have maintained a greater distance; but as he sought a rapprochement between theory and practice it is not surprising that he became rather reticent and uneasy about his relationship with Gentile.

In her early years in England, Lion was enthusiastic about Collingwood's work, especially *An Essay on Philosophical Method* on which she commented that there was 'nobody in the world except [Collingwood], herself and Gentile who could have done certain things in it so well.'²² However, her enthusiasm later waned: in 1941 she published an opaque review of *An Essay on Metaphysics*;²³ and after the war, in discussion with H.S. Harris, she claimed that 'He never had an original idea in his life. He got everything from Professor Gentile.'²⁴ Whether she really believed that or was too upset by Collingwood's brusque repudiation of Gentile and fascism in his later writings to take the trouble to be fair to him I do not know.²⁵

Fascinating Festschrift: Philosophy and History

Earlier I quoted Collingwood writing to Smith concerning possible influences on his 1936 lecture on *Human Nature and Human History*.²⁶ I concur with Peters that this is a pivotal text in his thought on the philosophy of history, together with his ruminations on the festschrift for Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy and*

²² Letter from R.G. Collingwood to Ethel Collingwood, 13.11.33, in private possession.

²³ *Philosophy*, 16 (1941), 74-78.

²⁴ H.S. Harris, 'Philosophy of life', *Clio*, 27 (1998), 485-500, 487.

²⁵ For a fuller account of Gentile's reception in England, see J. Connelly, 'Collingwood, Gentile and the New Idealism in Britain' in B. Haddock and J. Wakefield (eds) *Thought Thinking: New Essays on the Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile, Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 2014.

²⁶ R.G. Collingwood, *Human Nature and Human History, Proceedings of the British Academy* 22 (1936); reprinted in R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946; Revised edition with an Introduction and additional material edited by W.J. van der Dussen, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.)

History.²⁷ Peters is right to emphasise the importance of both *Human Nature and Human History*, and Collingwood's participation in the production of *Philosophy and History*. His involvement with this festschrift was close, so close that at one point he complained that he was virtually editing it. After its publication he reviewed it for the *English Historical Review*. His review demonstrates exactly how close his thinking was to some of its central themes and how they formed the basis for his own reflection. Thus his reading of Alexander's essay on 'The Historicity of Things', spurred him to clarify his thought on the nature of history in a 16,000 word essay written in December 1935 'Reality as History', subtitled 'An experimental essay designed to test how far the thesis can be maintained that all reality is history and all knowledge historical knowledge.'²⁸ Agreeing with much of Alexander's argument and its close associate, Whitehead's process philosophy, nonetheless he refused to go all the way with them, and argued that the difference between them turned on the meaning and implications of the term 'historicity' itself. For Collingwood historicity required thought; process and change *per se* do not historicity make. What makes a world historical is thought and the ability to re-enact it, which is the theme of *Human Nature and Human History*. In reviewing Gentile's essay in the same volume, Collingwood effected a partial reconciliation with Gentile, whose adherence to fascism had caused him so much difficulty. He roundly endorsed Gentile's view that:

One implication of the truth, that what the historian seeks to do is to discover the thought of historical agents, is worked out by Signor Gentile in a paper on 'The Transcending of Time in History'. He too holds that all

²⁷ R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton (eds.), *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936); Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 340-5.

²⁸ Reprinted in R.G. Collingwood, *The Principles of History* ed. W.H. Dray and W.J. van der Dussen, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1999).

reality is historical, but for reasons very different from Mr. Alexander's. What is indubitably historical is the life of the human mind; now, for Gentile, mind is the only reality, nature is only a construction of ideas, a product of human thought, existing and therefore developing with the development of the thought that constructs it. Nature, in the scientist's present conception of it, is not historical; but the scientist's present conception of it is only the stage now reached in the historical development of science, and thus not nature itself, but the reality (as Kant would have said, the thing in itself) underlying it, is historical, being in fact the scientist's thought. Time is transcended in history because the historian, in discovering the thoughts of a past agent, re-thinks that thought for himself. It is known, therefore, not as a past thought, contemplated as it were from a distance through the historian's time telescope, but as a present thought living now in the historian's mind. Thus, by being historically known, it undergoes a resurrection out of the limbo of the dead past, triumphs over time, and survives in the present. This is an important idea, and I believe a true one. Its importance for the historian lies in the fact that, so conceived, history is no longer a 'story of successive events': it is the actual possession by the historian, here and now, of the thought whose history he studies. And a past whose thought the historian is unable thus to make his own, whether through lack of evidence or through defect in his own mental powers, inability to sympathize with it, is a past at once dead and unknowable. This doctrine has a practical bearing on historical method. It implies that in order to understand a certain past event or state of society the historian must not

only have sufficient documents at his disposal; he must also be, or make himself, the right kind of man; a man capable of entering into the minds of the person whose history he is studying.²⁹

These sentiments, which may be best described as Collingwood's creative reinterpretation of Gentile, are instructive when one considers the crystallisation of his thought on history as expressed in *Human Nature and Human History* and the sections on philosophy of history in *An Autobiography* which served as a summary account of his views prior to the posthumous publication of *The Idea of History*. These texts were perhaps the turning point in the development of Collingwood's mature philosophy of history.

In parallel with the arrival of the first drafts of the essays in *Philosophy and History* we find in Collingwood's *Notes Towards a Metaphysics* this intriguing passage:

Nature is the realm of change, Spirit is the realm of becoming. The life of the spirit is a history: i.e. not a process in which everything comes to be and passes away, but a process in which the past is conserved as an element in the present. The past is not merely a precondition of the present but a condition of it. Whereas in nature the past was necessary in order that the present may now exist ... the past being thus left behind when the present comes into being, in history, so far as this is real history and not mere time-sequence, the past conserves itself in the present, and the present could not be there unless it did. Thus, if there is a history of thought, Newton's physics still stands as a necessary element in

²⁹Review of R. Klibansky and H.J. Paton (eds), *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, *English Historical Review*, 52, 1937, 141-6.

Einstein's: if it does not, there is no history but only change. The historian does not simply argue back from the present to what the past must have been: he finds the past living on in the present. The immediate form of this is memory, where the past lives on as past in consciousness, constituting an element without which the present consciousness would not be what it is.³⁰

Peters comments that:

In this passage, which follows directly upon his criticism of the Italians, Collingwood takes up the notion of the living past just as he had done in the 'Libellus'. This suggests not only that the notion of the living past formed the basis of Collingwood's criticism of the Italians, but also that he developed it in confrontation with their views. The starting point of Collingwood's philosophy is that it is not the present that keeps the past alive, but the past keeps itself alive. The past can therefore not be reduced to a mere *pensato*, or an abstraction made by present thought. The past is an active force in the present in the sense that the present would not be what it is without the past.³¹

Quite so – and hence the curiosity of Collingwood praising Gentile for seeing that the past is not lost, is not merely *pensato*, because time can be transcended in historical knowledge. As suggested earlier, this was perhaps a meaning projected onto Gentile's thought by Collingwood, who had now thought through the relationship between the past and present and the conditions for the possibility

³⁰ Collingwood, *Principles of History*, 130.

³¹ Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, 331

of re-enactment of past thought, conceived as identical in its mediation but differing in its immediacy.³²

As we have seen, in his engagement with *Philosophy and History*, Collingwood was both stimulated by, and reading his own theses into, the book. This shows precisely how important it was at the time he was writing the lectures and addresses which made up the *Idea of History* and through which his enduring reputation in the philosophy of history was established. One might ask why Collingwood, who already had a reputation both as an historian and as an author on the philosophy of history, was not invited to contribute to the volume? Dray and van der Dussen state that: 'It is indicative of how little Collingwood's ideas on history were valued or even known in his lifetime that his name does not appear among the contributors to ... *Philosophy and History* ... one of the few significant publications on the subject in English during the 1930s.'³³ Maybe: but perhaps his absence was our gain.

A Living Past?

A very interesting unifying theme of Peters's book concerns the relation of the past to the present, in particular the idea of the living past, something that he rightly says Collingwood was grappling with from the writing of *Libellus de Generatione* in 1920 and after. This essay was inspired by, and a copy and sent to de Ruggiero, and it states in bold clear terms many of the key themes that Collingwood later came to elaborate in his more fully worked out philosophy. This includes the idea of a living past, intimately related to his famous dictums

³² Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 300-1

³³ Collingwood, *The Principles of History*, xxi, fn 25.

that 'all history is the history of thought', 'historical knowledge is the re-enactment in the historian's mind of the thought whose history he is studying' and 'Historical knowledge is the re-enactment of a past thought incapsulated in a context of present thoughts which, by contradicting it, confine it to a plane different from theirs.'³⁴ Collingwood, although he laid the foundation for these conclusions in *Libellus de Generatione*, did not succeed in clarifying his thought on the matter for another decade or so. The first breakthrough occurred in 1928; the next in his *Notes towards a Metaphysic* in 1933-4, through dialogue with the thought of Croce and Gentile (and, as ever, active in epistolary dialogue with De Ruggiero), and finally in his engagement with *Philosophy and History*.

For Collingwood, Gentile cannot give a proper account of the relation between the past and the present and this is traceable to his otherwise important and admirable focus on thought as activity, as pure act; mind, as Collingwood often liked to repeat, is what it does. However, in Gentile's philosophy this is expressed by a sharp distinction between the living act of thinking (*pensiero pensante*) and thought as the dead residue of thinking (*pensiero pensato*). In Gentile's account they stand outside one another in an abstract relationship which severs the relationship between past and present. Hence Collingwood remarks that:

The past is, on this view, an abstraction from the present, which alone is actual; history is a projection of thought backwards in time, like a jet of water thrown backwards by some marine animal to push it forwards.

There is therefore no real development: only an eternal present, which does not enrich itself by taking up the past, but defecates a past out of

³⁴ Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, pp. 110, 112, 113.

itself. This seems to me to be subjective idealism. It follows from the indifference of logical structure between fact and fact: since in everything that matters every fact is identical with every other, all presents are the same present, differing “merely empirically” i.e. not at all. The past being a mere abstraction from the present, past facts cannot be known in their concreteness, and there is no series of facts; there is no transition from one to another, nothing becomes, everything *is* in a timeless present. Gentile seems to me to have concentrated his attention on the epistemological notion of the historian building up his history into the past and so forming his perspective of past time, but to have neglected the problem of the relation between perspectives; and each man's perspective is for him a subjective-idealist world, in which the object is not spirit (*pensiero pensante*) but idea (*pensiero pensato*). The problem of development, which had been pushed out of sight by Croce's polemic against Hegel, has been wholly overlooked by Gentile, with the result that Fascist thought, egocentric and subjective, can rightly be called by Croce antistoricismo.³⁵

Peters rightly sees that, first, Collingwood's philosophy hung together as a whole and, secondly, that there is an intimate connection between his metaphysics and the rest of his philosophy. As noted above, Collingwood frequently suffers the fate of a polymath whose writings on different subjects are each viewed from the perspective of monomaths, interested in only one subject: this limits their view of his philosophy as a whole and the relation between its parts. Peters clearly shows how different drafts and manuscripts reveal the workings of the engine

³⁵ Peters p. 329-30; Collingwood, *The Principles of History*, 128-9.

underlying his philosophy as presented in its mature published form to the reader. For example, in drawing up an abstract of his argument for *Human Nature and Human History*, Collingwood uses the language and concepts of actualism, but in the published lecture he eschews this language and posits his thought in relation to English and Scottish authors such as Locke and Hume.³⁶ In fact, *Human Nature and Human History* might fruitfully be seen as the distillation of a lifelong parallel engagement with the work of the Italians and Samuel Alexander. In relation to the process philosophy of Alexander and Whitehead, he accepted their account of the physical world while at the same time denying the identity of change and historicity for reasons discussed above.

Here, it is worth interjecting here another facet of his distinction between the natural sciences and the historical sciences by considering his analysis of causation. This is not as well known as it should be in the philosophy of history. Collingwood distinguishes three senses. In sense I, 'cause refers to the free and deliberate act of a conscious and responsible agent, and causing means providing a motive. In sense II, what is caused is an event in nature, and its 'cause is an event by producing or preventing which we can produce or prevent that whose cause it is said to be.' In sense III, what is caused is an event, and its cause is another event standing to it in a one-one relation of causal priority.³⁷ He goes on to state that:

Sense I may be called the *historical* sense of the word 'cause', because it refers to a type of case in which both C and E are human activities such as form the subject-matter of history. When historians talk about causes, this

³⁶ Peters, *History as thought and Action*, 342.

³⁷ R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940; second edition, with introduction and additional material, edited by R. Martin, Oxford Clarendon Press, 1998), 285-6.

is the sense in which they are using the word, unless they are aping the methods and vocabulary of natural science.³⁸

Far from giving primacy to the use of the term in the physical sciences he asserts that this use is derivative from its use in history and the applied sciences such as medicine. Originally a cause was a reason for acting in a certain way; in medicine and other practical activity it refers to the ability or otherwise of ensuring or preventing something from happening. In physics he shows both that it is no longer presupposed and that it is incoherent. Collingwood had worked on refining this view of causation for ten or more years prior to publication, in parallel with both his metaphysical thought and his philosophy of history.

Why has this account of causation, clearly of interest to the historian and for the philosophy of history, been given inadequate attention? Perhaps too much time has been devoted to the intricacies of re-enactment and other doctrines regarded as central to his philosophy of history. In part I am arguing that his is another example of a failure to integrate Collingwood's philosophy as a whole, with the result that important arguments get left outside the mainstream of discussion in particular domains. Even Dray, although he notices this discussion pays insufficient attention to it;³⁹ and Peter Johnson's excellent *Collingwood's The Idea of History*⁴⁰, precisely because of its tight focus on that work, omits direct discussion of causation, which is also absent from its index. To consider *The Idea of History* apart from *An Essay on Metaphysics*, *The Principles of Art*, or *The New Leviathan* is therefore a failure to appreciate it properly, because one is presented only with a one sided and often misleading picture.

³⁸ Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*, 286.

³⁹ See W.H. Dray, *History and Re-enactment: R.G. Collingwood's Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp.157-64.

⁴⁰ P. Johnson, *Collingwood's The Idea of History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Rethinking re-enactment

Let me illustrate and amplify the points made above by using the old war horse of re-enactment. I shall consider this by reference to the work of Quentin Skinner, a self-professed Collingwoodian who rejects re-enactment; or at least, he refuses to use or endorse the *term* 're-enactment.' The irony is that Skinner does not repudiate the *substance* of anything that Collingwood asserts; but the fact remains that he did reject it, and this poses the question why? There are several possible answers. Perhaps he was concerned about the intellectual baggage of a discredited idealism; perhaps he was worried about its being associated with what he saw as a discredited theory of mind; perhaps he sees it as unnecessary or logically incompatible with Collingwood's other views (or what he wants to take from those views); perhaps it marks a desire for originality;?

The primary reason for the rejection, I suggest, is that Skinner interprets re-enactment as a version of a discredited *verstehen* theory which he associates with notions of empathy and intuition. Thus the problem seems to lie in his identification of re-enactment or rethinking as a leap from one inaccessible Cartesian mind to another through an occult act of intuition. But if he really thinks that Collingwood is a Cartesian he is simply wrong. Further, although he wants to avoid use of the term, he nonetheless presents a picture of intellectual history which amounts to exactly what Collingwood means by 're-enactment'. Consider his injunction to 'focus on the writer's mental world, the world of his empirical beliefs. This rule derives from the logical connection between our

capacity to ascribe intentions to agents and our knowledge of their beliefs.’⁴¹

Further, he urges intellectual historians to conceive their basic task as ‘trying so far as possible to think as our ancestors thought and to see things their way.

What this requires is that we should recover the concepts they possessed, the distinctions they drew and the chains of reasoning they followed in their attempts to make sense of their world.’⁴²

Here I endorse Hyrkkänen’s view that, ‘here we are touching upon a conflict of interpretation of Collingwood’s intentions ... I take Skinner to mean, simply, that we have to be able to think how our ancestors thought by trying to see things their way. Collingwood would have said, simply, that we have to be able to re-enact what they thought.’ Re-enactment means envisaging the situation: it is hard to see wherein the difference lies between this and Skinner’s expression ‘seeing things their way’. And he expresses his puzzlement by commenting that:

re-enactment is, however, a term Skinner refuses to employ and, accordingly, an act he refuses to perform, because he takes re-enactment to mean that historians should, for instance, “re-enact or re-create the experience of being sixteenth-century demonologists or peasants of Languedoc or any other such alien creatures.”⁴³

What lies behind Skinner’s reluctance? Part of the problem here is that in the first wave of interpretation of Collingwood’s *The Idea of History*, influential

41 Q. Skinner, ‘Motives, Intentions, and the Interpretation of Texts’ in J. Tully, (ed) *Meaning and context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), 78.

42 Q. Skinner, ‘Interpretation, Rationality and Truth’, in *Visions of Politics, Vol. 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 47.

43 M. Hyrkkänen, ‘All history is, more or less, intellectual history: R. G. Collingwood’s Contribution to the Theory and Methodology of Intellectual History’, *Intellectual History Review*, 19(2) (2009), 251-263, 257 (quoting Skinner, ‘Interpretation, Rationality and Truth’, 47).

commentators made two key mistakes. The first was to assume that Collingwood was offering an *intuitionist* account of re-enactment, and the second was that they took this to be a *methodological* recommendation. Thus, Patrick Gardiner, for instance, refers to Collingwood's 'suggestion of some sort of telepathic communication with past thoughts'.⁴⁴ Such is the power of Collingwood's innocent metaphor of 'inside' and 'outside' when let loose in a world still in the grip of Ryle's denunciation of Cartesian dualism;⁴⁵ compounded by a failure to read Collingwood's non-dualist philosophy of mind as expressed in *The New Leviathan* and *The Principles of Art*. Hence they took the metaphor literally. Although some, like Gardiner, later recanted,⁴⁶ the damage was done and continued to wreak havoc for a long time, and scholars coming to maturity in the early 1960s, like Skinner, seem to have been infected by it. Thus, Skinner argues that: 'we can surely never hope to abolish the historical distance between ourselves and our forebears, speaking as though we can spirit away the influence of everything that has intervened, empathetically reliving their experience and retelling it as it was lived'.⁴⁷ This might be true, and its target might have been taken to be Collingwood: but if it was, it certainly wasn't the historical figure R.G. Collingwood.

⁴⁴ P. Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 39; W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, third edition (London: Hutchinson, 1967), 57-8.

⁴⁵ See G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949), 56-8, where although he does not mention Collingwood he is clearly his target.

⁴⁶ P. Gardiner, 'Collingwood and Human Understanding', in A. O'Hear, ed., *Verstehen and Humane Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 112. Gardiner comments that he had been 'unduly influenced by Collingwood's metaphorical terminology, as well as taking for methodological precepts what are more plausibly interpreted as conceptual claims regarding the implications of the notions of historical knowledge and understanding.'

⁴⁷ Q. Skinner, 'The rise of, challenge to and prospects for a Collingwoodian approach to the history of political thought', in D. Castiglione and I. Hampsher-Monk (eds) *The History of Political Thought in National Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 185.

So why did Skinner not use the idea of re-enactment? Is it because of the intuitionism he saw in it? Or because he took it to entail re-enacting both meaning and also feelings and emotions? Or is it because he saw it as some sort of special method which avoided the need for historical evidence?⁴⁸

We have seen that Skinner rejects the doctrine of re-enactment and yet in his positive characterisation of historical method steers indistinguishably close to it. Further, in various places he refers favourably to the very passages in which Collingwood develops the theory. This can perhaps be explained by considering two issues in the way re-enactment is interpreted and understood. The first is the theory of mind it presupposes; the second is whether it is characterised as condition of the possibility of historical knowledge or as a method to be for gaining historical knowledge. On the first point, Skinner rejects the theory because of what he sees as its reliance on intuition. He rejects the view of mind he (falsely) supposes Collingwood to hold and does this by aligning Collingwood with the *verstehen* tradition. On the second, his approach tends to emphasise the importance of reconstructing the problem situation facing an author/actor intervening in a debate at a particular time and place. This appears to be re-enactment in its methodological interpretation. I would argue that there is, Collingwood, a distinction between re-enactment as an *epistemological claim* in which, if the historical reconstruction of an historian is successful, there is success in rethinking the thought of a past historical agent; and there is re-enactment as a *heuristic device*, ranging from the injunction to try to put oneself in someone's place and see the situation through their eyes,⁴⁹ through to the

⁴⁸ As though a working archaeologist was ever likely to suggest such a thing.

⁴⁹ See, for example, the passages on Nelson and sea battles in *An Autobiography*, 58, 112-13.

importance of ascertaining the complex of question, answer and presupposition, which informed the thought of the historical agent. Skinner accepts the latter while denying the former, and this is a plausible and coherent position: but it is certainly accepting at least one aspect of re-enactment. But why does he deny the former?

My answer is this: he converges on re-enactment without approaching what he sees as its contentious elements and yoking himself to the term, and he signifies his limitation of sympathy with it both by not using the term and also by explicitly denying it. It is an asymptotic convergence but, approaching it as he does, he never has to accept the label of re-enactment. It is as though if he is led to water too quickly he cannot re-think; but that if gradually led to water he does re-think. The reason he rejects it in this form is because he sees himself as faced with a) a method which b) captures intuitively or in an occult fashion the thoughts of past agents independently of evidence, based c) on a Cartesian or dualist theory of mind. Faced with such a prospect, Skinner rightly recoils, because if this was Collingwood's view it should not be accepted.

Conclusion

How much of Peters's account is of value to contemporary philosophy of history? The short answer is that there is considerable value. The details of the story often turn on matters of important principle concerning methods, interpretation, re-enactment, the living past, the nature of mind, the different forms of experience by which we cognise the world, and so on. These are still live issues. So any serious discussion of them, never mind that it is conducted within the guise of a discussion of differences affinities and influences between

philosophers writing nearly a century ago, retains and will retain its interest. What audience, is the book addressed to? My answer is a far wider readership than perhaps knows it. To understand the philosophy of the early twentieth century one needs to know something of Italian neo-idealism, and to follow debates in the philosophy of history one needs to understand Collingwood's thought which in turn requires an understanding of Italian neo-idealism. This book is an ideal compendium for this readership: to misappropriate one of Hegel's favourite dictums: here is the text, dance thou here.

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