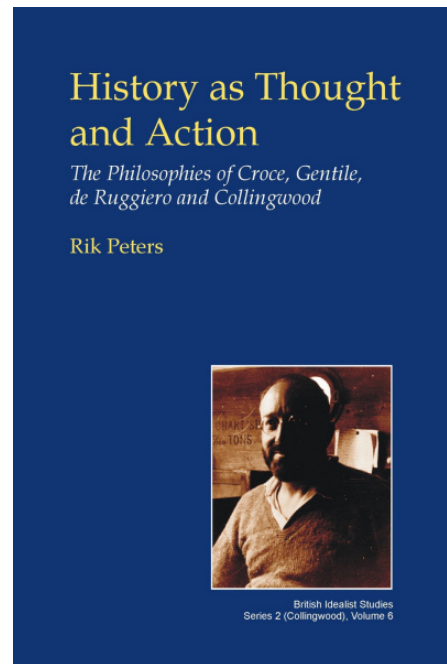


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REVIEW ESSAY

A story of philosophical ‘relationships’

History as Thought and Action. The philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood, Rik Peters, British Idealist Studies, Series 2: Collingwood, Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2013, x + 429, £30 (hardback), ISBN 978-1845402440



Forty years ago Quentin Skinner effectively consigned vague claims about ‘influence’ to the dustbin of historiographical method. ‘Influence’ is, he said, often hard to establish, spurious, and oftener still it is more or less un-evidenced – excepting the ‘evidence’ of one thing resembling another (Skinner 2002, 75–9). In recent years specialists in the thought of R.G. Collingwood have mostly proved a little evasive on the question of his influences. James Connelly has contended, for instance, that ‘the real question is that of affinity, not influence’ (Connelly 1995, 92). There is perhaps a further reason why claims about influence are not always gladly heard. It is of course by no means defamatory to the power of his mind to describe Collingwood’s philosophy as ‘Kantian’, as Giuseppina D’Oro (2002) consistently has – or as ‘Hegelian’, as Gary Browning (2004) has countered. But unless you are comparing him to Hegel or Kant, identifying an author as considerably influenced by anyone speaks against his originality and the independence of his mind, at least implicitly. At worst it might imply that his work is merely derivative.[†]

Earlier Collingwood scholars were less delicate. In 1967 William M. Johnston devoted two chapters of *The Formative Years of R.G. Collingwood* to the influence (these were pre-

[†] I have encountered this first hand. The first time was immediately after I had presented a paper on Collingwood’s philosophy of history at an international conference a few years ago. The first respondent was an Italian friend, whose only question in response to my paper was whether I had been aware that Collingwood had translated Croce’s *La filosofia di Giambattista Vico*. I said I had been. But there was no follow-up question. The implication was clear.

Skinnerian years) of Croce, Gentile, and Vico (Johnston 1967, 66–90). And this is essentially the question that Rik Peters returns to in *History as Thought and Action*, albeit in a way that does not fall foul of Skinner’s critique. ‘The main aim of this book’, Peters explains, ‘is to reconstruct the role of the Italians [named in the title] in Collingwood’s development. In this context’, he adds, “‘role’ is not to be taken as ‘influence’” (p. 12). Instead Peters declares a broader pursuit: to establish the ‘relationship’ between Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero, and Collingwood by ‘reconstructing the story’ (p. 13).

It is certainly to the benefit of Collingwood scholars to have such an account finally collected together in one place. Before *History as Thought and Action*, there were several, varying in accessibility, accounts to consult – Clementina Gily Reda’s very preliminary ‘Considerations on Collingwood and Italian Thought’ (1995), for example; or the several essays collected in Boucher, Connelly and Modood’s *Philosophy, History and Civilization* (1995), including ‘Art Thou the Man: Croce, Gentile or de Ruggiero?’ by James Connelly; ‘Croce and Gentile in Collingwood’s New Leviathan’ by H.S. Harris; ‘Vico, Collingwood and the Character of a Historical Philosophy’ by Bruce Haddock; and a good essay titled ‘Croce, Gentile and Collingwood on the Relation between History and Philosophy’ by Rik Peters himself. Most of what is discussed in those essays is now dealt with in *History as Thought and Action*. One possible oversight is William M. Johnston’s *The Formative Years of R.G. Collingwood* (1967), which is not mentioned in Peters’ text, even though two of its chapters are devoted to the relationship between Collingwood and Croce, Gentile, and Vico. Indeed, Peters’ references to Johnston’s book only go as far as page 25. (Johnston’s chapters on the role of the Italians comprise pages 66–90.)

That Collingwood’s thought is related to that of Croce at least has never been a secret. E.W.F. Tomlin was already discussing it in print in 1953, where he went into as much detail as to distinguish their accounts of dialectic (Tomlin 1953, 19–20). More recently, J.W. van der Dussen refers again and again to Croce and de Ruggiero in *History as a Science* (1981), and Croce’s name crops up just as regularly in Stein Helgeby’s *Action as History* (2004). In fact, most full-length works on Collingwood discuss the Italians at some point. But they usually do so within limits set according to the focus of the precise topic at hand. Van der Dussen focuses on Collingwood’s philosophy of history, for example, while David Boucher discusses the role of Collingwood’s ‘Italian connexion’ in the formation of his political thought.

But, according to Peters, there has been significant disagreement over the relationship between Collingwood and Italian philosophy, partly because (he explains) although many have discussed the role of the Italians (he names Knox, Donagan, Rotenstreich, Mink, Rubinoff, Dray, and van der Dussen), their relative ignorance of Croce leads them to misstate his role in Collingwood's work. Peters' aim in *History as Thought and Action* is, then, to establish a definitive account of what these thinkers did for Collingwood's philosophy, but to do so by correcting certain misreadings of them, especially of Croce. Resulting from this, the chief difference between previous work and *History as Thought and Action* is that the latter offers far more in the way of close exegesis, analysis, and comparison of the Italians' work than is currently on the market. For the casual interested reader this has mixed results.

On the one hand, it is very much to Peters' credit that he has chosen this quite traditional chronological 'story' approach to a question that is actually very complex. There are infinite possible ways in which past thinkers can be said to 'relate' to one another. There is 'influence' in the traditional sense: A argues that x is the case and B, being convinced by A's demonstration, then argues in his own work that x is the case. But there are other possible 'relations' between thinkers that no single term seems to capture properly. For example, A argues that x is the case, which B has good reason to doubt, so B devotes much of his work to demonstrating that x is not the case. Or, A argues that x is the case, B is impressed by the quality of A's demonstration, and hence abandons his own work on x. Or, A uses certain terms to prove one thing, and B borrows the same terminology to demonstrate something slightly different. Real stories in the history of ideas are never as simple as these stock examples. Between any number of past thinkers there are invariably instances of all of them: common sources of inspiration, changes of position, uncited borrowings, misreadings, misrepresentations, abandoned research projects, and plain ignorance of one another's work. It makes perfect sense, then, to illustrate these complex relationships not by arguing that B relates to A to such-and-such an extent, or in such-and-such a respect, but rather by simply telling the story. This is what Peters has tried to do: to (in his words) 'reconstruct the development of the dialogue between Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero, and Collingwood in a chronological narrative'. Peters' basic intention is to detail who said what, in which publications and in what correspondence, who read it, when, what he thought of it, what he said about it, and how he responded – all in more-or-less chronological order. This

arrangement (as opposed to a more thematic one, for example) reveals some of the protagonists' character, which more investigative historical narratives, focusing on textual relations alone, can lack. We hear, for example, about these philosophers swapping books and articles, reading on holiday, meeting up during foreign trips, holding long conversations which lead to new lecture courses, and exchanging letters containing criticisms of each other's work, confessions of partial failure, and news of personal affairs.

It is also much to Peters' credit that he often reconstructs these dialogues by recruiting Collingwood's own theme of 'question and answer'. This is not merely an appropriate stylistic flourish. Peters, I think, demonstrates the power of 'question and answer' as a device in the historiography of philosophy that can neatly unpack the vague concept of 'relationship' into clearer, more manageable parts, and that can link together as intellectual history what might otherwise degenerate into a succession of one thing being said after another. Early writings show, for example, that 'most of Collingwood's questions were about the relationship between the different forms of experience and its implication for theory and practice, in particular historical knowledge and moral action' (164–5) – interests which, Peters explains, owe to Collingwood's background family activities, but which Italian philosophy helps him to formulate properly as philosophical problems. Collingwood's distinction in *The Idea of History* between mediated and unmediated thought is aimed at solving a problem he notices in the work of Gentile (355). At other times the sharing and development of philosophical problems is reciprocal: Peters shows us, for example, de Ruggiero raising further problems in response to an essay sent him by Collingwood – an essay intended to go a good way toward solving problems that he, de Ruggiero, had already raised (240–1). And *Speculum Mentis* is later presented as Collingwood's attempt to solve that same new problem (251).

On the other hand, there are practical disadvantages to the way Peters has conceived his book, not least of which is that the resulting text, being heavily exegetical on a subject the reader may not yet know very much about, is sometimes quite trying. The nine chapters (of ten) in which Peters details the early, middle, and later periods of Croce's, Gentile's, de Ruggiero's, and Collingwood's development, certainly demonstrate Peters' close reading of original texts and correspondence. But although he does an admirable job of giving his readers a fair overview of these complex authors' ideas, he is not so successful at presenting them at their most inspiring. Peters has tried to present the pure material in as bare, fair,

and honest a way as possible, and to save his comments on similarities, differences, etc. for afterwards. His own points can, in this way, be kept back as a 'big reveal'. (It is not until half way in that we discover the chief point Peters is trying to make.) But this can actually be especially taxing for the reader, since there is no specific pursuit to follow during these chapters, and thus no obvious closing in on the quarry. Moreover, with commentary postponed, the reader feels that he is expected to carry all of this detail with him for a final reckoning at the conclusion stage – or that he should be making notes.

Peters' main point is, though, worth dwelling on. He shows that *Collingwood is not as deeply indebted for his doctrines to the Italians named in the title as many contemporary historians of ideas assume*. Certainly many of Collingwood's concepts, phrases, and examples remind us of Croce, Gentile, and de Ruggiero. But seen in the context of his development (Peters argues), there are some important differences. For example, although Collingwood and Croce both held Vico in high regard, and said as much explicitly, their readings of him are significantly different. Collingwood is critical of Croce's view of art and of religion, in both of which areas Croce shows an 'outsider's view of [the] experience' (133, 138–9). This point is a correction of early Collingwood scholars, who commonly assume that Collingwood essentially follows Croce on art (Donagan 1962, 123; Jones 1972, 42–3, 62), and a challenge to contemporary writers who habitually invoke Croce to say only that Collingwood follows him (Hughes-Warrington 2003, 54, 148, 151–4). Collingwood is further dissatisfied with Croce's moral and political philosophy, and (as Tomlin pointed out in 1953) with his dialectic of question and answer. He identifies in Croce's work a major fault in the 'fallacy of the false positive'. And Collingwood's distinction between implicit and explicit principles (his reworking of the 'an sich' and 'für sich' distinction) attacks the very foundation of Italian idealism, though he does not advertise the fact to his own readers. Collingwood also distinguishes between different subject matters and different method – which for the Italians was (Peters says) 'inconceivable'. And, above all, Collingwood always maintains the notion of the 'living past' as a past that lives on, even if we are not aware of it, whereas for the Italians the past only 'lives' in being rethought. Peters' broad conclusion is that it is a general rule of their 'relationship' that Collingwood's own thinking often develops out of his criticisms of Croce. This is not, though, a new finding, as Peters acknowledges: van der Dussen and Dray have already pointed it out (van der Dussen 1981, 25; Dray 2001, 33). Johnston probably took the same point further than anyone by devoting a chapter to the

idea of 'Benedetto Croce as a Foil to R.G. Collingwood' (Johnston 1967, 66–80) though, as I have already said, Peters does not discuss Johnston's work.

The fact that *History as Thought and Action* is a little light on original argument in no way diminishes its value. On a point such as that dealt with here by Rik Peters – a common point of dispute in need of clearing up once and for all – originality is considerably less important than scholarly rigour, and on that score Peters has, I think, excelled. His reward is the knowledge that *History as Thought and Action* will stand as *the* authoritative statement on Collingwood's relation to Italian philosophy for many years. Peters has clearly achieved his aim of reconstructing the dialogue between Collingwood, Croce, Gentile, and de Ruggiero by telling the story, and he has done so in a way which should more than familiarize the reader with the key texts of that story. As well as all this, Peters' study has not only preserved Collingwood's reputation among his readers for originality: he has, I think, given further reasons for thinking that reputation deserved: 'Italian philosophy raised many of Collingwood's questions, but his answers were definitely his own' (p. 397).

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