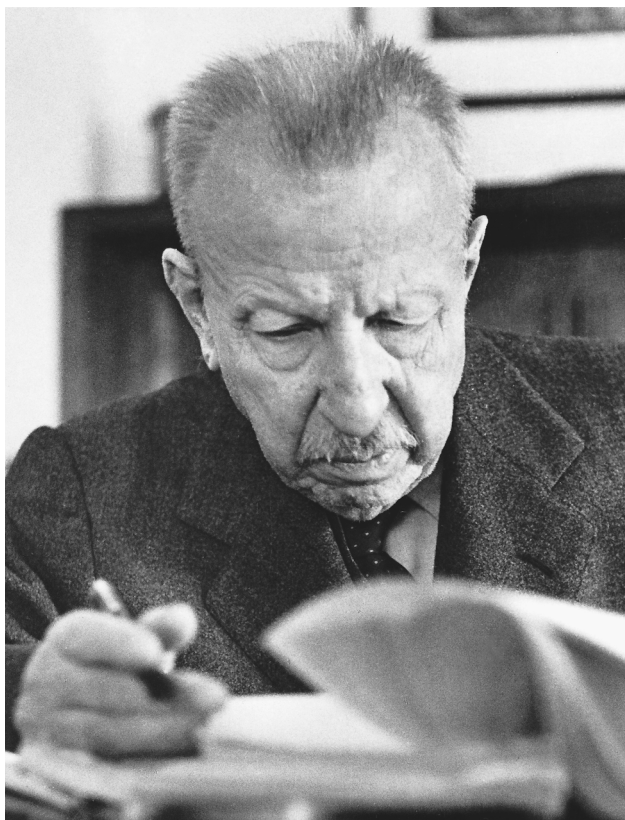


HISTORY AS THE STORY OF LIBERTY

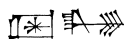


BENEDETTO CROCE

HISTORY AS THE STORY OF LIBERTY

BENEDETTO CROCE

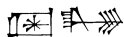
FOREWORD BY CLAES G. RYN



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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the
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It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C.
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Foreword

When Benedetto Croce died in 1952 he had been Italy's preeminent intellectual for half a century and had become a cultural symbol and a revered elder statesman. Croce had already acquired an international reputation in the early years of the century, after the publication of his enormously influential *Aesthetic* (1902). This was the first of the three books that constitute the philosophical core of his work, the other two being *Logic* and *Philosophy of the Practical*, both published in 1908. Croce, who was born in 1866, was appointed a senator for life in 1910, in recognition of his achievements. Family wealth made it possible for him to live as an independent intellectual, and he worked with great energy in his palazzo in Naples. His corpus fills some eighty volumes. For over forty years he published his own bi-monthly review, *La critica*.

Croce's fame brought invitations to be more active in politics. He served for a year as Secretary of Education in the government that was followed, in 1922, by that of Benito Mussolini, who named Giovanni Gentile as Secretary of Education. Croce and Gentile had earlier made philosophical common cause against positivism, but sharpening disagreements had driven them apart. In 1925, in response to a "Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals" signed by Gentile, Croce wrote and obtained distinguished signatories for a "Counter-Manifesto." At considerable risk he remained a public critic of fascism. Black Shirt troopers broke into Croce's home and raided his library. Because of his stature and international reputation he was not imprisoned, and *La critica* was not censored, but he was placed under permanent

surveillance. Croce could not be mentioned in the major newspapers. His books were removed from academic reading lists and could be kept only inconspicuously in bookstores and libraries. In 1944, after the collapse of the fascist government in Italy, Croce was appointed a minister in the new democratic government, but, at the age of eighty, he declined an invitation to seek election as provisional Head of State. After leaving the government and until 1947 he remained president of the Liberal party.

Croce's liberalism does not fit standard definitions in the English-speaking world, and it has far less in common with that of John Locke than with that of Edmund Burke. Croce regards the individual as the creative center of society, but he rejects social atomism. Individual, society, and state are to him different ways of speaking of a single, complex historical reality. Croce advocates limited, constitutional government and political freedoms, but he rejects fixed notions of the legitimate functions of government. Liberty is for Croce not, as for Locke, a free gift of nature; rather, liberty arises out of a historically conditioned struggle to realize life's higher potentialities. History does not offer inevitable progress. The belief that man can "acquire and permanently possess truth, virtue and happiness" is to Croce a vulgar illusion. Civilization means "continual vigilance" against relapsing into barbarism. Croce dismisses the egalitarian impulse as philosophically absurd and politically oppressive. His liberalism is aristocratic in that he views the great, truly liberating achievements as the work of a few. Outstanding works of goodness, truth, or beauty benefit large numbers of people, but only a minority can fully understand them.

History as the Story of Liberty first appeared in 1938. Its original title, *La storia come pensiero e come azione* ("History

as Thought and as Action”), expresses two distinct but closely related meanings of history for Croce. History is made by the multifarious activities of human will; but that which has been willed by man also forms the material for his self-understanding. In human life, action and reflection upon action presuppose and require each other.

To study the past, Croce argues, is to understand ourselves and our own time better, for history shapes the present. Indeed, the only real basis of knowledge of our humanity, its heights and its depths, is our own history. To Croce, knowledge of the particular is indeed possible, contrary to the philosophers before Hegel, notably Plato and Aristotle. Particularity and universality are dialectically implicated in each other. History for Croce does not consist of external events or objects to be studied, as in positivism, simply by empiricist methods, but is a living force to be understood from within an evolving human consciousness.

Croce is, therefore, a philosopher of history, but not in the sense of one claiming to have discovered history’s ultimate meaning or to present a definitive philosophical system. He argues that human self-knowledge is based in historical experience understood in a comprehensive, nonempirical manner. Philosophy and the serious study of history ultimately coalesce. The philosopher tries to articulate human experience conceptually and to discern its universal “categories.” Though some thinkers see clearly and deeply, no philosophical formulations are final.

Croce affirms the enduring reality of the good, the true, and the beautiful, but he does not regard them as static, transcendent essences beyond history. They are inconceivable apart from the opposites in tension with which they are realized. All reality known to man, Croce maintains, bears the

mark of the obstacles and conflicts characteristic of the historical world. Evil, falsehood, and ugliness threaten the higher potentiality of human existence, yet without those challenges there could be no life, no development. The longing for an ideal, tensionless reality is an escape from life.

According to Croce, "Evil is the continual undermining of the unity of life and therefore of spiritual liberty; just as Good is the continual re-establishment and assurance of unity and therefore of liberty." Liberty, he writes, "is realized in every thought and in every action that has the character of truth, poetry and goodness." Truly liberating creativity does not shun restraint; it disciplines, concentrates, and structures existence even as it throws off impediments to richer life.

The efforts of the creative person are always indebted to the past, Croce contends, but they never simply repeat it. They do not imitate some suprahistorical model of individual and social perfection. They are fresh instances of the higher values of human existence, syntheses of particularity and universality achieved by unique individuals responding to the needs of their own historical circumstances. Croce rejects the notion of a suprahistorical transcendence and substitutes for it the conviction that universals are manifest only in concrete particulars.

CLAES G. RYN

The Catholic University of America

Preface

I propose in this volume to take up again the subject of the *Theory and History of the Writing of History* which I wrote in 1912–13, and which was continued in my *History of Italian Historiography in the Nineteenth Century* and in several other shorter works. I do not wish to offer this book in replacement of the previous book, but only to add new considerations born of my further studies and stimulated by new experience of life. In conformity with its origin, this book consists of a series of essays which share an implicit unity in the thought which runs through them all, and to which I have given also an explicit unity by means of the first essay, which serves as an introduction. Any slight repetition or infraction of the order of exposition noticeable now and then is a consequence of the literary form of the essay.

Particular emphasis is laid, in this volume, on the relation between the writing of history and practical action; not by way of defence against the attacks which in the name of abstract moral absolutism are nowadays often delivered against “historicism” by people who happen to be anxious to put morality outside the pale of history, and think to exalt it, so that it can agreeably be revered from afar and neglected from near at hand: no, not with that motive, but because historical thought is born in an extremely complicated and delicate dialectical process out of the passion of practical life, transcending the latter and getting free of it in a pure judgment of truth. By virtue of that judgment, passion is converted into decisive action.

The problem is difficult. Indeed all the problems of historical thought are difficult when, as in this book, it is viewed

as the sole form of knowledge, and in writing these pages the author has sometimes had the feeling, in the course of his meditations, of having penetrated into the gruelling depths of Goethe's *Reich der Mütter*.

B.C.

NAPLES

January 1938

Part I

WHAT MAKES A HISTORY BOOK HISTORY

Criticism of historical works encounters the same difficulties as the criticism of poetry, or analogous difficulties. Some critics are simply at a loss, with the one as with the other, to know how to take them, and cannot catch the thread which connects them to their own mind; others set upon them with criteria which are extraneous and arbitrary, multiple, eclectic, or self-contradictory; and only a few judge them honestly by that criterion which alone is in keeping with their character. In Italy during recent years those few have undoubtedly increased in numbers; but when I go back in my mind to the days of my youth, in the 'eighties and the 'nineties, it seems to me that a criticism and a history of the writing of history was even less existent than a criticism and a history of poetry.

Works were turned out about historians all of which were superficial and documentary, concerned with sources, biography, authenticity, and the like. The only, or almost the only work which in so far as it touches these arguments might have given an example and suggested a better method, was de Sanctis' history of Italian literature, and that was misjudged, misunderstood and discredited.

A history book is not to be judged as literature or eloquence in the sense that was customary to the old humanistic men of letters who, when not otherwise occupied, used to translate Horace, or indited some historical commentary on an historical incident to which they were quite indifferent

but which they deemed a suitable subject for a pretty and becoming presentation.

When the Abbé de Vertot was presented with some documents designed to correct the current story of a siege, he replied, "Mon siège est fait," my literary page is written. Paul Louis Courier was sure that "*toutes ces sottises qu'on appelle l'histoire ne peuvent valoir quelque chose qu'avec les ornements du goût,*" and that it was really all right to let Pompey win the battle of Pharsalia, "*si cela pouvait arrondir tant soit peu la phrase.*" Now it is certainly desirable that historical work should be undertaken in scholarly fashion, but since literary merit is often dissociated from historical thought, the latter, even if it is expressed in a rough or careless literary form, still preserves the virtue of its thought.

Neither is an historical work to be judged by the greater or less number and correctness of the facts it contains, if only for the obvious reason that there are very copious and correct collections of facts which are quite clearly not histories, and others which are sparkling with historical intelligence but poorly equipped with information, or even littered with facts that are unreliable, legendary or fabulous: one only has to think of Vico's *Scienza Nuova*. Anthologies of information are chronicles, notes, memoirs, annals, but they are not history; and even if they are critically put together, and every item has its origin quoted or its evidence shrewdly sifted, they can never, on the plane on which they move, however hard they try, rise above unceasing quotation of things said and things written. They fail to become truth to us just at that point where history demands an assertion of truth arising out of our intimate experience. It is certainly desirable that the facts used in an historical work should have been carefully verified, if only to deprive the pedants of an arm which they insidi-