Review Article

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

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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

¹ Proof reading could have been better and there are a large number of typographical errors.
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, other than by specialists in Italian thought and philosophy: but his *History of European Liberalism* 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. 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**

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

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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).