
Croce in America: Influence, Misunderstanding, and Neglect

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Introduction

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) was the leading Italian intellectual of the first half of the twentieth century and one of Europe's best known public figures by the 1940s. The pioneering review he launched in 1903, *La critica*, is to be found in virtually every American research library, as are many of his more than eighty books. First in aesthetics and literary criticism, beginning in about 1910, and then in historiography, beginning in about 1920, Croce's ideas were prominent in American discussion—and remained so into the 1960s. For much of that time, his status as one of the notable European thinkers of the century was taken for granted. Moreover, he was long respected as a champion of “the religion of liberty” in opposition to fascism. An influential Italian-American scholar, writing in 1937, found him “the most famed Italian abroad, at least in the scholarly world, since the days perhaps of Galileo.”¹ But Croce did not attract major disciples in the United States

Author's note: This article was adapted from my “La fortuna di Croce e Gentile negli Stati Uniti,” which was invited for inclusion in *Croce e Gentile un secolo dopo*, a special issue of *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 73, nos. 2-3 (May-December 1994): 253-81. The editors of that journal asked me to give the article a strong bibliographical dimension. At the suggestion of the editors of *Humanitas*, I have developed the sections on Croce into a separate article. Although retaining the bibliographical dimension, the present article probes the substantive issues more deeply.

¹ Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, *Goliath: The March of Fascism* (New York: Viking, 1937), 295-96.

or become involved in sustained exchange with American thinkers. Indeed, his ideas were frequently misrepresented, and since the early 1970s he has been virtually forgotten.²

The prestige of historical figures rises and falls, and the tendency for the biggest to fall hardest may be especially prevalent in intellectual history. But there seems something anomalous about Croce's case, as René Wellek, the distinguished historian of criticism, recently emphasized. He noted that in movements influential at various points since Croce's death—from Russian formalism and structuralism to hermeneutics and deconstruction—Croce "is not referred to or quoted, even when he discusses the same problems and gives similar solutions." Yet Croce, for Wellek, was arguably the most erudite and wide-ranging figure in the history of criticism.³

Croce's fate seems to constitute a potentially significant chapter in the ongoing intellectual history of the West. As Wellek implies, the major questions at issue cannot be confined to a national level—and they admit of no easy answers. Even in Italy, there remains disagreement about the center of gravity and the enduring import of Croce's intellectual legacy. And because there is no settled criterion, the basis of any misunderstanding is hard to assess. Still, it is worth proceeding country by country in asking the central questions about Croce's fate, not least because, in each case, the answers may reveal idiosyncratic blind spots and significant contingencies in the intellectual histories of the countries at issue. What, then, is the place of the United States in the larger story of Croce's fate? What was noted and what was missed when the Americans encountered Croce?

When Croce first became known in this country, around the turn of the century, he had only recently come to prominence in Italy—in the debate over the scientific status of historical knowledge. His idiosyn-

² Near the end of Croce's life, Gian N. G. Orsini, a Crocean who would become a distinguished professor of Italian literature at the University of Wisconsin, noted with some exasperation the failure of American intellectuals to engage Croce, who, Orsini argued, had anticipated by decades several of the apparently most innovative currents in American intellectual life. See [Gian] Napoleone [G.] Orsini, "Note sul Croce e la cultura americana," in Francesco Flora, ed., *Benedetto Croce* (Milan: Malfasi, 1953), 359-66. Although it suffers from important omissions, Ernesto G. Caserta's *Studi crociani negli stati uniti: Bibliografia critica (1964-1984)* (Napoli: Loffredo, 1988), provides a useful critical assessment of much recent work on Croce.

³ René Wellek, *History of Modern Criticism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), vol. 8: *French, Italian, and Spanish Criticism, 1900-1950* (1992), 187, 189. See also vol. 6: *American Criticism, 1900-1950* (1986), 63.

cratic contribution led him to an aestheticist theory of knowing, based partly on Giambattista Vico, that he outlined in his *Aesthetic* of 1902, the book that brought him to international prominence. With the young philosopher Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944) as his junior partner, Croce launched *La critica* the next year. Now attracting an array of followers, he quickly became a focal point for young Italians of the emerging modernist avant-garde.

In Italy and abroad, Croce and Gentile were promptly lumped together and identified as neo-idealists or neo-Hegelians. But while those labels were used in the United States as well, Americans almost never considered the two thinkers in tandem.⁴ Whereas Croce's work in aesthetics drew interest immediately, Gentile began to attract attention only after World War I, first as a philosopher of education and educational reformer. Although Croce wrote a laudatory introduction to Gentile's *The Reform of Education*, published in the United States in 1922, he and Gentile had begun to fall out over strictly philosophical matters in 1913, when it became clear that Gentile was far more committed to a rigorous idealism, and to philosophical system-building, than was Croce. After the two diverged politically in 1925, in response to the challenge of fascism, Croce leveled some of his most bitter polemics against Gentile and his effort at a systematic recasting of the idealist tradition.

*Croce and
Gentile fell out
early.*

Nevertheless, Croce was quickly typed as a "neo-idealist" or "neo-Hegelian" by American critics, and this made it difficult for his ideas seriously to penetrate American culture. There had been an idealist moment in the United States, but idealism was receding by the first years of the century, when Croce and Gentile were establishing themselves as major figures in Italy. So to characterize the Italians as neo-idealists seemed to warrant boxing them out, without seriously confronting what was innovative in their thinking. Whereas in England such philosophers as Bernard Bosanquet, J. A. Smith, Herbert Wildon Carr, and R. G. Collingwood seriously confronted the thought of both

⁴ The most significant exception was Patrick Romanell (born Pasquale Romanelli), who followed his 1937 Columbia dissertation on Gentile with a number of books and articles, some focused on Croce, some comparative. See also Merle S. Brown, *Neo-Idealist Aesthetics: Croce-Gentile-Collingwood* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966). The best studies of Gentile published in the United States were by accomplished philosophers who were comfortable with the idealist tradition; each understood that Gentile was a rigorous idealist in a way that Croce ultimately was not. See Roger W. Holmes, *The Idealism of Giovanni Gentile* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), and H. S. Harris, *The Social Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960).

Croce and Gentile, neither of the two Italians had any such resonance among major philosophers in the United States.⁵

Croce protested
"idealist" label.

As Croce's thought developed, it became ever clearer that the neo-idealist characterization simply did not fit him, though it was indeed appropriate to Gentile. Even in essays translated into English, Croce protested against the label "Italian neo-idealism" and the persistent tendency to identify him with Hegel.⁶ For Croce, philosophical system-building was beside the point, and he eventually concluded that the very term "idealism" ought to be abandoned altogether.⁷ Writing in the influential *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* in 1952, Frederic Simoni showed that the idealist stereotype had nurtured a whole tradition of misunderstanding around Croce in America. Simoni concluded, without exaggeration, that "reference to Croce in current literature constitutes a comedy of errors."⁸

Even apart from Croce's association with an unfashionable idealism, American ways of viewing the Italian thinker tended to discourage sustained engagement. Croce was variously typed as a romantic, an expressionist, a primitivist, and a partisan of irresponsible private imagination. Such characterizations meshed uneasily with the charge of hyper-rationalism or hypertrophy of philosophy that was implicit

⁵ Although comparison with the British case is illuminating, the ready exchange of ideas between Britain and the United States blurs the contrast somewhat. Not only were English translations of Croce by the Britons Douglas Ainslie and R. G. Collingwood widely available in the United States, but so was the important early study by Herbert Wildon Carr, *The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce: The Problem of Art and History* (London: Macmillan, 1917). In Carr's book, Americans at least had access to an informed and sympathetic account of Croce's thought up to that point. However, another widely available work from Britain, Angelo Crespi's *Contemporary Thought of Italy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), was hostile to both Croce and Gentile. A lecturer at the University of London, Crespi produced the book for the "Library of Contemporary Thought," published first in Britain. Writing from a Christian perspective, he took a critical view of Italian neo-idealism, with its effort to purge all transcendence, and found it deeply implicated in present problems, including nationalism and fascism. See especially pp. 246-49.

⁶ See, for example, *My Philosophy and Other Essays on the Moral and Political Problems of Our Time* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), 19.

⁷ Benedetto Croce, *Discorsi di varia filosofia*, 2 vols (Bari: Laterza, 1959), 2: 15-17 (1945).

⁸ Frederic S. Simoni, "Benedetto Croce: A Case of International Misunderstanding," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11 (September 1952): 7-14. The quoted passage is from p. 9. Simoni found especially damaging an early review of Croce's *Estetica* by George Santayana, to be discussed below. This essay was promptly published in translation in Francesco Flora, ed., *Benedetto Croce*, an important anthology on Croce's thought and influence; see pp. 345-57.

in the attribution of neo-Hegelianism—an indication of the difficulty Americans had in grasping the center of gravity of Croce’s thought. In fact, Croce’s novelty lay partly in his way of reconceiving the relationship between imagination and intellect.

Even those relatively sympathetic to Croce and his collaborators sometimes viewed him as central to an interesting but provincially Italian culture, not quite part of the European mainstream. John Crowe Ransom, who helped spearhead “the new criticism” in American literary studies, took inspiration from Croce and recent Italian thinkers—but on the basis of a curious sense of what those thinkers had achieved. Writing to Allen Tate in 1927, Ransom expressed the hope that he and Tate might revive “southernism” in the United States just as Croce and one or two others seemed to have spearheaded a revival of Italianism among the younger generation of Italians.⁹ There is some justification for this perspective in the case of Gentile, who became preoccupied with the Italian tradition, but Croce was arguably the most cosmopolitan European intellectual of his time. Ransom’s characterization did not remotely represent Croce’s cultural aspiration or achievement.

*Croce a
cosmopolitan
European
philosopher.*

Over the years, to be sure, a handful of significant American intellectuals, from Joel Spingarn and Carl Becker to René Wellek and Hayden White, sought seriously to engage Croce’s thought. But there would seem to have been room for a more fruitful interchange between Croce and the Americans.¹⁰ It did not help, to be sure, that Douglas Ainslie, whom Croce authorized to translate his central philosophical works, most notably *Aesthetic, Logic, and The Philosophy of the Practical*, was not quite up to the task. His translations were often clumsily literal, and, as Gian N. G. Orsini has emphasized, they conveyed a misleading sense of crucial Crocean terms like *intuizione* and *fantasia*. But such mistranslations were not decisive. Some of Croce’s leading American detractors read him in Italian; other English translations of

⁹ Ransom to Tate, from Memphis, Tenn., June 25, 1927, in *Selected Letters of John Crowe Ransom*, edited by Thomas Daniel Young and George Core (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 175.

¹⁰ Seeking to explain why Croce did not receive the recognition he deserved in the United States, Italo De Feo noted that Croce declined several opportunities to come to the United States, though he traveled frequently in Europe. See Italo De Feo, *Croce: l’uomo e l’opera* (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1975), 636-42. De Feo also noted that the Italian language was an obstacle, and certainly it is true that American scholars were less likely to read Italian than French or German. Still, major early students of Croce like Joel Spingarn and Irving Babbitt did read Italian.

his works were highly competent, even superb.¹¹ So we must look deeper to make sense of Croce's fortunes within the culture of the United States.

The Implications of Croce's Aesthetics

Even before Croce published his *Aesthetic* in 1902, the influential review *The Nation* had begun following his ideas, thanks especially to Joel Spingarn, a young literary scholar who would become Croce's first influential American partisan. Having just discovered Croce's work, Spingarn began corresponding with the Italian thinker in 1899.¹² In brief, unsigned notes in *The Nation* thereafter, Spingarn discussed first Croce's preliminary "Tesi fondamentali di un'estetica" in 1900, then his full-scale *Aesthetic* in 1902.¹³ Moreover, Spingarn helped spearhead the new *Journal of Comparative Literature*, which offered in 1903 what proved an especially influential review of Croce's book.

Croce sketched
a radical
historicism.

The reviewer was the philosopher George Santayana, who found Croce's conception abstract, artificial, barren—as was only to be expected, said Santayana, from a "strictly transcendental philosophy" like Croce's.¹⁴ To be sure, Croce's seminal work of 1902 was not quite what it first seemed. It became ever clearer that in dealing with imagination, intuition, and expression as he did, Croce was not offering what Santayana was expecting, a contribution to the delimited philosophy of art and criticism; rather, Croce was sketching the contours of a radically historicist view of the world. But Santayana was particularly ill-disposed toward Croce's enterprise, and he remained a prominent an-

¹¹ See Gian N. G. Orsini, *Benedetto Croce: Philosopher of Art and Literary Critic* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961), 49-50, 304-306, 320n2, on the English translations of Croce. Perhaps the most praiseworthy are Arthur Livingston's translation of a selection from Croce's *Frammenti di etica*, published as *The Conduct of Life*, and Frances Frenaye's rendering of Croce's *History of the Kingdom of Naples*. Moreover, what other thinker has found so illustrious a translator as R. G. Collingwood, who brought out English versions of Croce's *Autobiography* and *Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*?

¹² Marshall Van Deusen, *J. E. Spingarn* (New York: Twayne, 1971), 19, citing a Spingarn letter of December 1899 to Croce. I have sought, without success, to locate Croce's letters to Spingarn. In correspondence, Professor Van Deusen told me that he possessed English translations, provided by Arthur Collins, but not the Italian originals. I would be grateful for further information.

¹³ See the "Notes" section of *The Nation*, 71 (November 15, 1900): 386; and 75 (September 25, 1902): 252-53.

¹⁴ G[eorge] Santayana, "Croce's Aesthetics," *Journal of Comparative Literature* 1 (1903): 191-95.

tagonist, later associating Croce with an aestheticist espousal of “art for art’s sake,” the antithesis of what Croce’s “aestheticism” in fact involved.¹⁵

Croce’s early advocate, Spingarn, was better able to grasp the wider implications of Croce’s evolving aesthetics, though even his reading was simplified and selective. Newly appointed professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, Spingarn explicitly proclaimed himself a Crocean in a widely discussed lecture entitled “The New Criticism” in 1910.¹⁶ Croce had showed, above all, that art was genuine creation, as opposed to mimesis, which is the expression or representation of something already in existence. And on that basis Spingarn made the soon-to-be-familiar Crocean arguments against moral judgments in art, against fixed genres, rhetorical figures, and rules of decorum, and against reductionist explanations in terms of race, the environment, or “the times.”¹⁷

*Art is creation,
not mimesis.*

By the second decade of the century, Croce’s aesthetics had made his a fashionable name among intellectuals. Thus he was one of twelve scholars from around the world to be invited to present lectures marking the inauguration of the Rice Institute in Houston in 1912. While declining to attend personally, Croce submitted one of his best-known essays, “Breviario di estetica,” translated by Douglas Ainslie and published immediately as part of the Rice proceedings.¹⁸

¹⁵ See especially two of the essays collected in Santayana’s *Obiter Scripta: Lectures, Essays and Reviews* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936), 30-34, 72-73. Santayana’s longstanding hostility was important to Croce’s fate in America. It was also a bit ironic, because Santayana lived in Rome for much of the 1930s and had the opportunity to probe Italian culture at close range.

¹⁶ The lecture was delivered at Columbia on March 9, 1910, and published as *The New Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1911). On Spingarn’s use of Croce, see Van Deusen, *J. E. Spingarn*, which includes numerous references to Croce; and Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*, 6: 61-63.

¹⁷ As Spingarn paraphrased Croce: “Every poet re-expresses the universe in his own way, and every poem is a new and independent expression.” The question about any particular work of art was not how well it conformed to some prior model or ideal, but what that work sought to express and how completely it succeeded. See Spingarn, *The New Criticism*, 24.

¹⁸ *The Book of the Opening of the Rice Institute*, 3 vols. (Houston, Texas: [The Rice Institute, 1912]). See vol. 2, pp. 430-517, for Croce’s “The Breviary of Aesthetic.” The same translation was then published in England under the title *The Essence of Aesthetic* (London: William Heinemann, 1921). Subsequently the American scholar Patrick Romanell published a new translation under the title *Guide to Aesthetics* (South Bend, Ind.: Regnery Gateway, 1979), with a useful introduction.

Meanwhile, Joel Spingarn was forced to leave Columbia in a dispute over academic freedom in 1911. But he continued to develop his ideas, always with an eye to Croce, while also becoming active in other pursuits, most notably as a leader in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He also helped establish, in 1919, the important publishing house Harcourt, Brace and Company, which would play an active role in disseminating the work of Croce, Gentile, and other leading contemporary European intellectuals in the United States.

The economic principle.

That publisher brought out in 1922 the first full-length study of Croce in this country—by Raffaello Piccoli, an Italian who had found his way to America after studying philosophy in England. In his preface, Piccoli noted that as a student in Italy he had been “a fervid and enthusiastic follower” of Croce, who had seemed to offer “the only safe path between the two precipices of a pseudo-scientific materialism on the one hand, and of a mysticism on the other.” But study in England, Piccoli continued, had then exposed him to a very different philosophical tradition—weaning him from his earlier idealism and dogmatism.¹⁹ The implication that Croce’s thinking was a dogmatic idealism thus cast a shadow over Piccoli’s book. And though Piccoli offered a solid introduction to the basics of Croce’s formal philosophy, his conclusion that Croce’s greatest achievement was likely to prove his elevation of the economic principle could only have thrown American readers off track.²⁰ Although Croce’s economic category did afford an opening for the questions Piccoli had in mind about nature, the body, and the passions, Americans who found these the key questions were bound to find Croce thin fare when compared with Freud, or with those philosophers who continued to afford cultural privilege to the scientific quest to understand the natural world.

Joel Spingarn sought to head off the misconceptions that were coming to surround Croce’s work in the United States, especially the assumption that Croce stood for romantic indulgence and “art for art’s sake.” In “The Growth of a Literary Myth” (1923), Spingarn responded to H. L. Mencken, the noted iconoclastic essayist, who had criticized the “Croce-Spingarn-Carlyle-Goethe theory” in response to Spingarn’s essays.²¹ Spingarn admitted that he had been trying to adapt Croce for

¹⁹ Raffaello Piccoli, *Benedetto Croce: An Introduction to His Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), iii-x.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 303-304.

²¹ Spingarn collected many of these essays in his *Creative Criticism and Other Es-*

an American audience, but he hoped he had not been responsible for the worst of the current misconceptions—the notion that Croce stood for emotional debauch, when in fact Croce had been seeking to transcend the romantic-classic antithesis altogether.

Aesthetics was also the focus of Croce's best known exchange with an American thinker, the noted pragmatist John Dewey.²² Croce and Dewey had played comparable roles in their respective cultures, and despite substantial differences, there was scope for a significant dialogue between them. The two thinkers respected each other, even as they recognized their difference over philosophical postulates that were fundamental in one sense, secondary in another. Croce explicitly noted that despite those differences, he and Dewey were both seeking to account for the world in terms of human freedom, and he sent heart-felt greetings on the occasion of Dewey's ninetieth birthday in 1949.²³ But when, late in the lives of both, the two finally confronted each other, their intellectual encounter did not live up to its potential.²⁴

Croce and Dewey: overlap and fruitful tension.

Although Croce had long given pragmatism credit for accenting the creative or constructive role of the knower, he believed the pragmatists had not been thoroughgoing enough in eschewing the old empiricism. Thus they had remained caught up in the dualism of mind and nature.²⁵ Dewey, for his part, had treated Croce dismissively in his key work on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, published in 1934. As Dewey had it, Croce's way of emphasizing intuition and expression stemmed from

says, now available in an enlarged edition (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1964). See pp. 162-78 for his response to what was becoming the familiar set of objections to Croce.

²² Croce reviewed Dewey's *Art and Experience* in *La critica* in 1940; reprinted in *Discorsi di varia filosofia* 2: 112-19. This review was then published in English translation as "On the Aesthetics of Dewey," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 6 (March 1948): 203-207, with a follow-up note by Dewey, "A Comment on the Foregoing Criticisms," on pp. 207-209. Croce responded in "Dewey's Aesthetics and Theory of Knowledge," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 11 (Sept. 1952): 1-6, a piece collected in Croce's *Indagini su Hegel e schiarimenti filosofici* (Bari: Laterza, 1967).

²³ Croce, "Dewey's Aesthetics," 1, 6.

²⁴ De Feo, *Croce*, 636-39. Even before the Croce-Dewey exchange, William Savery suggested that Dewey's conception, emphasizing the individuality of things, amounted to a kind of historicism that might be "allied to the romantic philosophies of Croce, Bergson, and Spengler." See William Savery, "The Significance of Dewey's Philosophy," in Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1939), 497-98.

²⁵ See, for example, Croce, *Indagini su Hegel*, 290-302. Reviewing Max A. Fisch, ed., *Classic American Philosophers*, in 1951, Croce found pragmatism on the right track, but generally superseded in European philosophy by the early twentieth century.

his deeper idealism, taking only mind as real, and indicated "the extreme to which philosophy may go in superimposing a preconceived theory upon aesthetic experience, resulting in arbitrary distortion."²⁶ Croce took considerable offense at Dewey's charges.²⁷

In an excellent summary of this encounter, George Douglas emphasized that not only was Croce never a Hegelian, but his philosophy of experience was not so different from Dewey's, as outlined in *Experience and Nature*.²⁸ On the other hand, Croce was not convincing in charging that Dewey, to have gotten so much right, must have been borrowing from the Italians without admitting his debt. Croce was too quick to assume that only his own radically anti-empiricist starting point could lead to an orientation to the world as attuned to human freedom and creativity as Dewey's. Though their terminology differed, Croce and Dewey had more in common than either recognized, especially in their common accent on the continuity of art with ordinary experience. So there was scope for a considerably more fruitful encounter than in fact developed.

Interest in Dewey's work has recently revived in the United States, thanks especially to the influential neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty. But this revival has brought little attention to the possibility of confronting Dewey with Croce. Among recent students of Dewey, Thomas Alexander has offered the most discerning assessment of Dewey's aesthetics, including Dewey's exchange with Croce and the charge of Croce and others that Dewey's aesthetics betrays unacknowledged elements of idealism.²⁹ But in other reassessments and reappropriations of Dewey, Croce comes up only in passing, if at all.³⁰

In his standard biography of Croce, Italo De Feo suggested that the

²⁶ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1934), 294-95.

²⁷ Croce, "Dewey's Aesthetics," 5-6.

²⁸ George H. Douglas, "A Reconsideration of the Dewey-Croce Exchange," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 28 (Summer 1970): 497-504. This brief article is among the best works on Croce in English; on pp. 501-2, Douglas is especially good on the Crocean notion of "intuition," which caused such problems for Croce's American commentators.

²⁹ Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience, and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), especially 1-13, 25-26, 281-82n25.

³⁰ Croce is barely mentioned in, for example, the recent study by Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991). While completely neglecting Croce, Richard Rorty has recently noted his own kinship with the Italian *pensiero debole* of Gianni Vattimo *et al.* See Rorty's introduction to *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6.

“immaturity” of Anglo-Saxon culture, with its materialist, positivist, and pragmatist lags, helps explain the lack of appreciation of Croce in the United States.³¹ But De Feo, like Croce himself, was surely too dismissive of pragmatism. Fruitful encounter required greater flexibility on both sides, but Croce was at least flexible enough to jettison idealism as he played up absolute historicism, a move that could have opened the way, at least, to a more fruitful discussion.

Croce’s aesthetics continued to attract attention after his death in 1952, but his American commentators generally focused on delimited problems of art and criticism rather than pushing on to his larger, radically historicist conception of the world. Still, those concentrating on aesthetics produced some of the best work on Croce in English, though they argued among themselves about Croce’s center of gravity. The most important contribution was Gian N. G. Orsini’s *Benedetto Croce: Philosopher of Art and Literary Critic*, which pointed out flaws in earlier accounts, and which remains one of the best studies of Croce’s aesthetics in any language. But Patrick Romanell, Merle Brown, and Giovanni Gullace also contributed significant works.³² Whereas Orsini found discrete phases in Croce’s aesthetic thought, Romanell, for example, highlighted Croce’s ongoing insistence on the cognitive significance of art to emphasize the continuity of Croce’s thinking.

*Continuing
interest in
Croce’s
aesthetics.*

For about fifteen years after his death in 1952, Croce’s thought continued to find a prominent place in major studies of the theory and history of literary criticism. Most important was the chapter entitled “Expressionism: Benedetto Croce” in the ambitious historical survey published in 1957 by William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, two of the most prominent American literary scholars of the period. In light of all that expressionism had come to mean, however, the title of the chapter was misleading, as was the authors’ suggestion that Croce offered “a master theory of art for art’s sake.”³³ Still, Wimsatt and Brooks

³¹ De Feo, *Croce*, 641. See also pp. 636-39 on Croce and America.

³² Gian N. G. Orsini, *Benedetto Croce: Philosopher of Art and Literary Critic* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961). On the import of Orsini’s work, see Dante Della Terza, “Croce in America,” in his *Da Vienna a Baltimora: La diaspora degli intellettuali europei negli Stati Uniti d’America* (Rome: Riuniti, 1987), 197-205. See also Brown, *Neo-Idealist Aesthetics*; and Giovanni Gullace, introduction to his translation of Croce’s *La poesia* (1936), *Benedetto Croce’s Poetry and Literature: An Introduction to Its Criticism and History* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), xiii-lxxiv. Patrick Romanell contributed, among other works, an especially helpful introduction to Croce’s *Guide to Aesthetics*.

³³ William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History 2*:

gave a balanced account of Croce's contributions to criticism and stressed the enduring value of his assault on fixed genres, classical figures of speech, and rules of propriety. And they played up Croce's important, if diffuse, impact: "The influence of Croce has been like that of Kant in the era 1800 to 1840 in France, of a pervasive and atmospheric kind, blending with a generally favorable climate of opinion so as not always to be clearly distinguishable."³⁴

Croce also drew the continuing interest of René Wellek, perhaps the most distinguished historian of criticism to write in English in the twentieth century. Wellek offered a discerning chapter on Croce in volume 8 (1992) of his monumental *History of Modern Criticism*, but he also considered Croce's influence in the United States in volume 6 (1986) and in essays over several decades.³⁵

*A more
fundamental
historicist.*

At the same time, Croce continued to serve as a basis for comparison in works on literary contemporaries who might usefully have engaged his work more systematically. John Paul Russo, author of a monumental intellectual biography of I. A. Richards, offered a penetrating comparison of Croce and Richards in 1991.³⁶ But his way of using the notorious term "historicist" interjected a note of ambiguity into his account. As Russo emphasized, Croce's early aesthetics was *anti-historicist* in its reaction against the widespread effort to explain the work of art in terms of historical context or a chain of historical antecedents. But by specifying the scope for creativity and novelty, this reaction served Croce's more radically historicist conception of the world, a conception that was more fundamental than a particular approach to *either* art or history. The notion that Croce was opposing historical approaches, while true in a limited sense, made it difficult for American thinkers to penetrate to the core of his thinking.

Although much of the discussion of Croce before 1930 focused on aesthetics and literary criticism, some major American thinkers under-

Romantic and Modern Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 499-521 (first published 1957). See especially 500, 505, 512-14.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 519.

³⁵ Wellek, *History of Modern Criticism*, 6, especially 61-63, 166; and 8, 187-223. In addition, see René Wellek, *Four Critics: Croce, Valéry, Lukács, and Ingarden* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 3-18, and the numerous references to Croce in *The Attack on Literature and Other Essays* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

³⁶ John Paul Russo, "Antihistoricism in Benedetto Croce and I. A. Richards," in David Perkins, ed., *Theoretical Issues in Literary Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 268-99.

stood that Croce's aesthetics pointed to a deeper set of questions about cultural priorities. Among the most important were Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, leaders of "The New Humanism" that emerged before World War I, then achieved its greatest influence around 1930. But though Babbitt and More understood the high cultural stakes of Croce's enterprise, neither was able to develop a serious dialogue with Croce's work. Discussing Croce in 1925, Babbitt concluded "that he combines numerous peripheral merits with a central wrongness and at times with something that seems uncomfortably like a central void." Babbitt was nervous about the radically historicist tendency of Croce's thought, which seemed to dissolve what Babbitt found essential—a center of value amidst change.³⁷

*Babbitt and
More misread
Croce.*

According to Babbitt, Croce offered a romantic "cult of intuition in the sense of pure spontaneity and untrammelled expression" and reduced "art to a sort of lyrical outflow that is not disciplined to any permanent center of judgment." Croce's failure to impose standards on the flux, Babbitt charged, entailed a kind of acquiescence in history, because everything is a matter of process and a thing is revealed by what it becomes.³⁸ Croce resembled Henri Bergson in embracing psychic restlessness and change for its own sake. Indeed, in Babbitt's view, Croce, more than anyone, had given philosophical expression to the modern cult of the speed and power of the outer world.³⁹

Babbitt did not do justice to Croce's way of meshing human ethical

³⁷ Irving Babbitt, "Croce and the Philosophy of Flux," originally in *Yale Review*, 1925, republished in *Spanish Character and Other Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1940), 66-72. This book is available in a new edition titled *Character and Culture: Essays on East and West* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1995), pagination of Babbitt's text the same. The quote is from p. 66. Similar charges were made repeatedly in Italy as well, perhaps most notably by Guido de Ruggiero during the 1940s. See especially his *Il ritorno alla ragione* (Bari: Laterza, 1946), 13-16. Babbitt had criticized Croce's conception of art as expression as early as 1910, but without addressing Croce's larger concerns. See Irving Babbitt, *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910), 222-28, 238. In a highly critical review essay on Spingarn's *Creative Criticism* in 1918, Babbitt condemned "recent primitivists like Spingarn and his master, Benedetto Croce" and went on to link the Croce-Spingarn position to emotional indulgence unlimited by any standards of judgment. In fact, however, Croce was just as opposed to "decadent aestheticism" but sought to head it off on a different, more novel basis than Babbitt did—and in a way Babbitt failed to grasp. See Irving Babbitt, "Genius and Taste," from *The Nation*, February 7, 1918, now in James Cloyd Bowman, ed., *Contemporary American Criticism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1926), 95-108. See pp. 96 and 104 for the passages quoted.

³⁸ Babbitt, "Croce and the Philosophy of Flux," in *Spanish Character*, 68-70.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 71-72.

capacity with the growth of the world in history, but in this he was no different from many of Croce's critics on both sides of the Atlantic. Still, Babbitt's association of Croce with a quasi-futurist cult of speed betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of Croce's thought. Yet Babbitt was arguably one of the finest American thinkers of his generation.

Paul Elmer More did no better as he criticized Croce's *Nuovi saggi di estetica* of 1920.⁴⁰ Not only was Croce a Hegelian in More's reading, but Croce's accent on the autonomy of art manifested the romantic cult of genius; Croce's message to creative writers was that they were not bound by the dictates of morality or truth. More found Croce comparable to the surrealists—or even to James Joyce, with his emphasis on a stream of consciousness not subject to purpose or choice. Croce, in short, was central to the disturbing modern tendency to dissolve the humanistic conception of man as a responsible creature with free will. In fact, Croce's central purpose was to make new sense of precisely that humanistic conception, in light of the eclipse of transcendence and the break into a radically historicist culture. More's was surely one of the most bizarre misreadings of Croce ever written.

Croce, for his part, evinced some interest in Babbitt at first, but he simply ignored Babbitt and More after their ill-informed critiques of the 1920s.⁴¹ Joel Spingarn had long criticized Babbitt's misinterpretations, pinpointing much that they had missed.⁴² But Spingarn's concern was primarily with aesthetics and criticism, so whereas he usefully clarified, for example, the distinction between specifying what is art and judging artistic quality, he could not address the deeper questions about Croce's radical historicism that were implicit in the critiques of Babbitt and More. The misreadings of the New Humanists thus ended up impeding fruitful encounter with Croce's work, despite Spingarn's effort at damage control.

The relationship between Croce and Babbitt has been at issue in a potentially more useful way in the efforts of the Swedish-born American political theorist Claes G. Ryn to restore Babbitt's thinking to currency. Although he considered Babbitt the most important source for contemporary cultural renewal, Ryn found Croce essential as a

*A new
conception
of life and
culture.*

⁴⁰ Paul Elmer More, *The Demon of the Absolute* (*New Shelburne Essays*, in 3 vols.: vol. 1) (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1928), 29-41.

⁴¹ Croce offered a critical review of Babbitt's *The New Laokoon* (1910) in *La critica* 23 (1925): 161-63. See also Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Irving Babbitt and the Problem of Reality* (Chicago: Regnery, 1986), 48.

⁴² Spingarn, *Creative Criticism*, 194-97 (originally published 1913-14).

complement. In *Will, Imagination and Reason*, published in 1986, Ryn sharply criticized both Babbitt and More for failing to devote more serious study to Croce, especially to Croce's *Filosofia della Pratica*, which developed a conception of the ethical that could usefully have complemented theirs.⁴³ Although Ryn, in the final analysis, overvalued Croce's formal philosophy and made Croce too much a philosopher of "eternal values," he placed Croce in an appropriate framework for comparison.⁴⁴ What was at issue, he understood, was not simply aesthetics or even systematic philosophy, but a more general conception of life and culture.

Despite Babbitt's misreadings of Croce, he and the Italian thinker were both seeking a new cultural balance in light of the tendencies toward self-indulgence and romantic excess that the modern cultural situation seemed to invite. But from a Crocean, radically historicist perspective, Babbitt was still assuming that a transcendent dimension was necessary. In attacking the views he imputed to Croce and Spingarn in 1918, Babbitt insisted that "in creation of the first order . . . the imagination does not wander aimlessly, but is at work in the service of a supersensuous truth that is not given to man to seize directly. . . . Creation of this order . . . is something more than the intense expression of some expansive ego, whether individual or national." In art and life, Babbitt went on, "our whole modern experiment . . . is threatened with breakdown, because of our failure to work out new standards with this type of imagination."⁴⁵ Though he shared precisely Babbitt's diagnosis, Croce posited a more novel solution, based on a particular understanding of historical knowing and history-making action, as he sought to show the way to a post-metaphysical moderation.

Croce shares Babbitt's diagnosis but offers novel prescription.

Whatever the questions that might be raised about Ryn's use of Croce, Ryn has shown the scope for a fruitful comparison between Croce and Babbitt, and his work is essential to any consideration of the relationship between Croce and the Americans. Moreover, his effort is still very much in progress. But though he is a highly independent

⁴³ Ryn, *Will*, especially pp. 50-51. See also the comparative study by an earlier student of Babbitt, Folke Leander, "Irving Babbitt and Benedetto Croce," in George A. Panichas and Claes G. Ryn, eds., *Irving Babbitt in Our Time* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 75-102.

⁴⁴ In a later article, Ryn referred to Croce as "perhaps the greatest technical and systematic philosopher of our own century." See Claes G. Ryn, "Universality and History: The Concrete as Normative," *Humanitas* 6 (Fall 1992-Winter 1993): 19. Ryn had in mind Croce's way of treating such categories as imagination, will, and reason.

⁴⁵ Babbitt, "Genius and Taste," 108.

thinker, Ryn is generally associated with the culture of the American Right. Thus, if successful, his synthesis of Croce and Babbitt would tend to place the Crocean legacy within the conservative intellectual tradition. From the perspective of the present author, Croce is not appropriately viewed as a conservative, and a conservative appropriation is likely to impede the renewed interest that his legacy merits.⁴⁶

Historiography and Politics

With the publication of his *History: Its Theory and Practice* in 1921, Croce was thrust into the center of a lively discussion that had been gathering force in American historiography for over a decade, thanks to pragmatism and the challenge of "the new history," proclaimed by James Harvey Robinson in 1912.⁴⁷ Whereas pragmatism raised a now-familiar family of questions about the truth-value of historical writing, the new history sought to give historiography greater contemporary import, especially by fostering ties to the new social science. So some of the most innovative American historians were already debating questions about science and objectivity, about the role of the historical inquirer and the uses of historical understanding, when Croce's book appeared.

Croce immediately attracted a number of these historians because he seemed, as the pragmatists did not, to confront the relevant questions, showing how historians might escape the shadow of science to make new sense of what they do. With his insistence that some contemporary concern energizes any genuinely historical inquiry, Croce seemed to offer the necessary alternative to positivist notions that the historian apprehends some past "thing-in-itself," as it actually happened. But Croce's were radical ideas, and they repelled some, even as they attracted others. At issue was the problem of relativism, which had become central to Western culture and which Croce claimed to have dissolved.

The most prominent of those to embrace Croce were Charles Beard and Carl Becker, who remain two of the best known American histori-

⁴⁶ Ryn's work, including his use of Croce, has recently attracted the attention of an able Italian scholar, Germana Paraboschi. See her *Leo Strauss e la destra americana* (Rome: Riuniti, 1993), 102-23, and "Etica ed estetica in Croce e Irving Babbitt. La sintesi di un conservatore americano," *La cultura*, 32, no. 2 (August 1994): 303-19.

⁴⁷ Harcourt, Brace and Company published Croce's *History: Its Theory and Practice*, which is Douglas Ainslie's translation of *Teoria e storia della storiografia*. James Harvey Robinson's *The New History* appeared in 1912.

ans of the century. Although Croce was not the source of their preoccupations, he significantly affected their understanding of the issues and the direction of their responses.⁴⁸ Yet so radical did Croce seem that even Becker and Beard approached him with caution.

Becker reviewed works by Croce and James Harvey Robinson in the *The New Republic* in 1922. Although he offered a reasonably discerning account of Croce, even explaining Croce's departure from Hegel, Becker gave Robinson the last word on the scope for accelerating the endless process of reconstructing mind.⁴⁹ In fact, Croce had room for precisely the reform effort that Becker envisioned; the difference concerned terminology and the levels of action at issue.

In "Every Man His Own Historian," his still-famous presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1931, Becker developed Crocean themes further, invoking Croce explicitly on the contemporaneity of historical inquiry and understanding.⁵⁰ Although his conception of truth and fancy, fact and interpretation, was ultimately not Crocean, Becker followed Croce in arguing that all knowing is fundamentally historical and bound up with projection into the future. Our accounts are always imaginative constructions; our ways of coloring the past vary with the present needs that lead us to ask historical questions in the first place.⁵¹ Yet Becker also followed Croce in insisting on the other side of the coin: the fact that historical understanding is always contemporary and provisional does not undermine its value; rather, historical understanding is precisely congruent with what we are and what we need. Still, Becker ultimately insisted on an idea of progress that was foreign to Croce. And because he assumed

*All knowing
is historical.*

⁴⁸ See Ellen Nore, *Charles A. Beard: An Intellectual Biography* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 156, 158-62, 165, on Beard's encounter with Croce's work during the 1920s. The extent of Croce's influence on Becker was the subject of controversy in the early 1970s. Hayden V. White, in "Croce and Becker: A Note on the Evidence of Influence," *History and Theory* 10, no. 2 (1971): 222-27, sharply criticized Chester McArthur Destler's "The Crocean Origin of Becker's Historical Relativism," *History and Theory* 9, no. 3 (1970): 335-42, for overstating the extent of Croce's direct influence on Becker. See also Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, *Carl Becker: A Biographical Study in American Intellectual History* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1961), 193-94.

⁴⁹ Carl Becker, "History as the Intellectual Adventure of Mankind," *The New Republic* 30 (April 5, 1922): 174-76.

⁵⁰ Now in Carl L. Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: F. S. Crofts, 1935), 233-255. See especially 239, 242-46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 248, 251-54.

that historical inquiry serves progress, he paid little attention to all that might compromise the truth-value of historical writing.⁵²

Charles Beard's encounter with Croce was ultimately less discerning than Becker's, but he too found Croce a welcome ally. As president of the American Historical Association, Beard even invited Croce to come to the United States to address the Association's annual meeting in 1933. Croce declined to appear personally, though he accepted Beard's invitation to convey, by letter, his sense of the present state of historiography. Beard included Croce's letter as part of his noted presidential address, "Written History as an Act of Faith." And much like Becker two years earlier, Beard invoked by-then familiar Crocean categories to show that the historian does not apprehend the past as it actually happened but selects and orders on the basis of some contemporary concern.⁵³

But Beard believed that Croce, with his apparently idealist presuppositions, was going too far in denying any independent reality, any past actuality. As he pondered what the world must be like, Beard found the later Alfred North Whitehead more convincing than Croce, so it is not surprising that many of Beard's accents ultimately diverged from Croce's.⁵⁴ From a Crocean perspective, Beard was too quick to settle for a dichotomy of science and faith, without sufficient attention to the sense in which historical inquiry remains rational, and central to a rational response to the world. Beard suggested, for example, that it is only through an act of faith that we understand the historical world

⁵² Cushing Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl Becker and Charles Beard* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1958), 45-46, is particularly good on this point.

⁵³ Charles A. Beard "Written History as an Act of Faith," *The American Historical Review* 39 (January 1934): 219-31, especially 220-21. Croce was also invited to attend the 1934 convention of the American Historical Association to explain his views at the plenary session on "philosophy and history." This time, in fact, the Carnegie Fund for International Peace seconded the invitation, but again Croce declined. However, he sent a paper, translated as "The Study of History: its Different Forms and its Present Tasks," which Crane Brinton read to the convention. The paper had been translated into English, at Croce's request, by Gian N. G. Orsini and was later published in Croce's *Il carattere della filosofia moderna* (Bari: Laterza, 1941), one of his most important works. See Henry E. Bourne's summary of both the circumstances and the paper itself in *The American Historical Review* 40, no. 3 (April 1935): 427-28. See also Orsini, "Note sul Croce e la cultura americana," 363.

⁵⁴ Nore, *Charles A. Beard*, 158-64, offers a discerning discussion of Beard's divergence from Croce, although she does not do justice to the more radical Crocean positions that troubled Beard. See note 62 below.

in terms of chaos, cycle, or progress. Beard was more concerned than Becker to counter the hegemony of science, yet he was at once troubled and fascinated by the apparently relativistic implications of doing so. As a result, he did not do justice to Croce's way of positing the connection between historical knowing and practical life.⁵⁵ More generally, he did not do as well as Becker at conveying Croce's understanding of the place of history in the present cultural economy—and in the ongoing growth of the world.⁵⁶

Whatever its limits, the vogue of Croce among theoretically adventuresome historians like Becker and Beard provoked the worried opposition of others. Attacking the presentist ideas then in the air, Robert Livingston Schuyler made the obvious points in 1932: "If we study the past not for its own sake, but for the light that it may throw on the present, our attitude toward history is technological and utilitarian, not scientific and disinterested."⁵⁷ Indeed, we would be better able to get at the past as it actually was if we did *not* know subsequent events, or our own contemporary situation. Elsewhere, Schuyler linked Croce's philosophy of absolute immanence to the new relativist physics and denounced both as guides for historians.⁵⁸

The discussion reached a deeper level in 1938 when a promising young philosopher, Maurice Mandelbaum, confronted Croce, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Karl Mannheim—taken to be the central modern relativists—in *The Problem of Historical Knowledge: An Answer to Relativism*.⁵⁹ In a critical review, Croce responded cryptically though effectively, based on his longstanding way of sidestepping the presuppositions that had led us to believe relativism was a problem.⁶⁰ But no American, not even

Relativism is not the issue.

⁵⁵ Wilkins, *Carl Becker*, 194-97.

⁵⁶ It should also be noted that before encountering Croce, Beard had offered a famous economic interpretation of the forging of the U.S. Constitution, and he came to associate relativism with economic determinism. Although Beard understood that his own interest in economic interpretation was itself relative, and although Croce for a time had welcomed historical materialism as one canon of historical interpretation, Beard's interest in the scope for such economic interpretation was far from the spirit of Croce. See Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt*, 50-55, for some aspects of this comparison.

⁵⁷ R. L. Schuyler, "Some Historical Idols," *Political Science Quarterly* 47 (March 1932): 13-18.

⁵⁸ Nore, *Charles A. Beard*, 159.

⁵⁹ (New York: Liveright, 1938). See especially pp. 54-57 for the core of his case against Croce. Mandelbaum would remain a significant philosopher and historian of ideas until death in 1987.

⁶⁰ Now in Croce's *Nuove pagine sparse*, 2 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1966), 2: 59-60. See also the balanced but ultimately critical review of Mandelbaum by Carl Becker in

Mandelbaum, fully grasped that position during the relativist debates of the interwar period, when Croce's influence on American historiography was at its height.

A few of the later efforts to reconstruct the debates revolving around Becker and Beard have better conveyed Croce's place in American historiographical discussion. Cushing Strout's *The Pragmatist Revolt in American History* pinpointed some essential differences between Croce and both Becker and Beard, showing, for example, that Beard's eagerness to use Croce against the pretense of scientific history led him to miss the essential subtleties in Croce's way of relating theory and practice, knowing and doing.⁶¹ Too often, however, even such later studies did not grasp the larger contours of Croce's radical historicism and thus simply repeated longstanding misconceptions. While generally doing justice to Croce's emphasis on the involvement of the present inquirer, they failed to show how that involvement can serve truth in Croce's conception and why, in the final analysis, relativism is simply not the issue.⁶²

Croce came up as a matter of course in American debates over cognitive issues in historiography until well into the 1960s, although by then he was getting a deeper hearing from philosophers of history than from practicing historians. Most significant was Jack W. Meiland's *Skepticism and Historical Knowledge* (1965), which, even without probing Croce's overall framework, proved better able than Mandelbaum to grasp Croce's generally constructivist orientation and the basis of his claim to have sidestepped historiographical relativism.⁶³ Still, as the analytical approach came to dominate, the philosophy of history focused on precisely the problems that Croce believed he had dis-

Philosophical Review 49 (April 1940): 361-64. Although he made the argument repeatedly, Croce offered his classic statement about relativism in 1915 in his "Contributo alla critica di me stesso," now in *Etica e politica* (Bari: Laterza, 1967), 350. Writing in 1971, Hans-Georg Gadamer made in much the same terms the argument that Croce had made in 1915. See Gadamer's "Replik" in Karl-Otto Apel *et al.*, *Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971), 299.

⁶¹ Strout, *The Pragmatist Revolt*, 44, 56.

⁶² In her solid *Charles A. Beard*, 159-61, Ellen Nore portrayed Beard as having borrowed selectively from Croce to avoid falling into the extravagance of Croce's alleged solipsism. The key for Beard was to maintain belief in a sphere of fact that exists, potentially knowable, independently of the observer. In a similar way, B. T. Wilkins played up the differences between Croce and Becker but did not do justice to Croce's understanding of the connection between historical knowing and practical life. See Wilkins, *Carl Becker*, 194-97.

⁶³ (New York: Random House), especially pp. 11-38, 42, 62, 81.

solved, especially causation and explanation, examined from a perspective that assumed the scientific approach to be paradigmatic. Those interested in historiography increasingly lumped Croce with Collingwood, who seemed to occupy a common ground in opposition to that scientific or analytical approach. Because Collingwood was more accessible, he was taken to offer the definitive statement of their position. Croce increasingly became a name, a footnote; there seemed no need to confront him directly.

But the agenda of historiographical discussion changed radically in 1973 with the publication of Hayden White's pathbreaking *Metahistory*, which remains central to historiographical discussion in the English-speaking world even today. And Croce figured prominently in White's book; indeed, White was no doubt the most influential American thinker to have confronted Croce during the past half century. Moreover, White was well equipped to understand what Croce was up to. In 1959 he had translated a central work by Carlo Antoni, one of Croce's major disciples, as *From History to Sociology*, and then, in an article published in 1963, proclaimed "the abiding relevance of Croce's idea of history."⁶⁴ Nothing in English had better showed why history for Croce transcends naturalism to become the story of liberty, or why Croce's historicism entails broadly liberal implications.

*For Croce
history
replaced social
science.*

But by the time he published *Metahistory* ten years later, White found Croce the ironically sterile culmination of nineteenth-century historiographical traditions.⁶⁵ Indeed, wrote White, "it is difficult not to think of Croce's 'revolution' in historical sensibility as a retrogression, since its effect was to sever historiography from any participation in the effort—just beginning to make some headway as sociology at the time—to construct a general science of society."⁶⁶ Croce was indeed hostile to sociology, but White's criteria of "progression" are dubious at best. And whatever we make of our cultural prospects at present, there is no question that White failed to do justice to Croce's quest for a cultural alternative to social science.

As White saw it, Croce was seeking to eviscerate historical knowl-

⁶⁴ The Italian title of Antoni's book is *Dallo storicismo alla sociologia*. Hayden White, "The Abiding Relevance of Croce's Idea of History," *Journal of Modern History* 37 (June 1963): 109-24.

⁶⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), chapter 10. See especially pp. 378-79, 397-400.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 385.

edge for conservative purposes. By severing it from the search for usable general knowledge, Croce denied history any present political import and confined it to the haven of art. Like innumerable Italian critics before him, White accused Croce of de-emphasizing action in favor of a passive acceptance based on retrospective understanding. White's own aim was to free us from the concerns about representation in language that had apparently contributed to this ironic disjunction between understanding and action.⁶⁷ But his account fundamentally misrepresented Croce's way of relating present concern, historical inquiry, moral response, and history-making action. In fact, Croce was seeking a more central cultural role for historiography, just as White was. But Croce did not settle into the relatively aestheticist position that White's *Metahistory* seems to invite, even though, at first, he seemed headed in precisely that direction. Typically, Croce attempted to posit a middle way, between non-rational creativity and rational discipline, between the ideal of getting the story straight and the giddy sense that the past is open to the historian's creative will. As a result, Croce ended up showing, as no one else has, why historical understanding is the measure—the *only* measure—of rational response.

As a leader in the wider humanistic discussion in the United States, White continued to refine his ideas after publishing *Metahistory*, but he no longer bothered with Croce as he did so. The fact that White, the most influential English-speaking intellectual to have confronted Croce's thought in recent years, ended up criticizing and then neglecting Croce in this way has been central to the fate of Croce's legacy so far.

*Croce's view of
history admired
as anti-fascist.*

But whatever the basis of White's intellectual evolution, the direction of historiography since Croce's death made Croce seem ever less relevant to mainstream historians. Croce's own histories, accenting the scope for free human response, were admired during the fascist era and were sufficiently innovative to elicit several solid studies.⁶⁸ As recently as 1970, his *Storia del Regno di Napoli* was published in English

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 394-402, 406-7, 415, 422-25.

⁶⁸ Richard V. Burks, "Benedetto Croce," in Bernadotte Schmitt, ed., *Some Historians of Modern Europe: Essays in Historiography* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1966), 66-99 (originally published by the University of Chicago Press, 1942); A. Robert Caponigri, *History and Liberty: The Historical Writings of Benedetto Croce* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955). Although it is based almost entirely on translations and secondary sources, Burks's essay makes good sense of Croce's understanding of the scope for generalization and philosophical clarification in a world of historical particulars.

translation by the University of Chicago Press as part of a series devoted to “Classic European Historians.” But Croce’s focus on a privileged ethical-political strand was utterly at odds with the new social history that developed from the *Annales* school to dominate American historiography by about 1980. Thus Crocean historiography increasingly seemed old-fashioned and irrelevant. His best-known historical work in English, *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (English translation 1932), was long admired as an instrument in the struggle against fascism, but it came to seem fantastically abstract as a history of nineteenth-century Europe.

Still, Croce’s role as the upholder of liberty against fascism brought him considerable credit in the United States, even after his death. For example, a special section on contemporary Italy in *The Atlantic* in 1958 included an appreciation by the important Italian intellectual Guido Calogero that played up Croce’s role as spiritual leader of the resistance to fascism.⁶⁹ During the 1940s, others invoked Croce’s authority against Marxism or looked to him for insight into “the German problem” in light of the Nazi experience.⁷⁰

But few among Croce’s American admirers confronted the basis of his recasting of the liberal tradition in response to what he called the “anti-historicism” of his own time. Indeed, it was not obvious to Americans that the liberal tradition *needed* the sort of recasting Croce was attempting. In his thinking about politics, Croce had not started with the individual rights central to Anglo-American liberalism; indeed, he had had only contempt for the conventional justifications for liberal democracy. Thus it was hard for Americans to find common ground with him. Croce could be admired from a distance, but there seemed no call for Americans to confront systematically the ways in

*Croce’s
liberalism
confounded
Anglo-
American
liberals.*

⁶⁹ Guido Calogero, “Benedetto Croce: Philosopher and Humanist of Modern Italy,” *The Atlantic* 202 (December 1958): 129-32.

⁷⁰ Nore, *Charles A. Beard*, p. 192, notes that Charles and Mary Beard quoted Croce’s anti-Marxism in arguing that Stalinism was the logical outcome of Marxism. Summing up Croce’s achievement for a standard American reference work in 1947, Giuseppe Prezzolini included Croce’s observations on Germany in enumerating what he found to be the unfortunately restricted handful of subjects for which Croce was known in the United States. See Giuseppe Prezzolini, “Croce, Benedetto,” in Horatio Smith, ed., *Columbia Dictionary of Modern European Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), 180-82. Croce’s later essays on Germany were translated with an introduction by the novelist and popular essayist Vincent Sheean as *Germany and Europe: A Spiritual Dissension* (New York: Random House, 1944).

which his commitment to liberalism differed from their own.⁷¹

Some even charged that, whatever the value of Croce's political stance in response to Mussolini's dictatorship, his thinking had fostered the relativism that had undermined democracy and fed fascism and totalitarianism. Most notoriously, the historian Chester McArthur Destler found Croce not only the major source of a deplorable new presentism in historiography, but also the outstanding exponent of a dangerous new philosophy that stressed relativism in values, impressionism in the arts, subjective activism for the individual, violence as a mode of social action, and success as the supreme value in public affairs. Croce, according to Destler, had thereby "helped lay the intellectual foundations of Italian fascism."⁷²

*Italian thinkers
in America
compromised
Croce's stature.*

The notion that Croce's thought was somehow implicated in the triumph of fascism found apparently more authoritative support from the assaults leveled against Croce by certain Italian emigrés in the United States.⁷³ Although such attacks had begun during the fascist period, they especially marked the pivotal 1940s, as Italy sought to find its way beyond fascism. The most significant came from two of the most influential Italian intellectuals in this country, Giuseppe Antonio Borgese and Gaetano Salvemini, each of whom had long been critical of Croce, though for somewhat different reasons.

In his arresting *Goliath: The March of Fascism* (1937), Borgese granted Croce's significance as an anti-fascist beacon but still portrayed him as doddering and ineffectual—the result of his neo-Hegelian philosophy. After referring dismissively to "the philosophy of history taught by a few self-satisfied professors, that whatever has happened in history was good and rational," Borgese found a justification of fascism implicit in Croce's thought: "the success of Mussolini, success being the only test that validates political happenings, was tantamount to a

⁷¹In his entry on Croce in the *Columbia Dictionary*, p. 181, Prezzolini noted the disparity between the Crocean and the American conceptions of freedom. Katharine Gilbert's "The Vital Disequilibrium in Croce's Historicism," in Milton R. Konvitz and Arthur E. Murphy, eds., *Essays in Political Theory Presented to George H. Sabine* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1948), gave some sense of Croce's position in his highly symptomatic exchange with Guido de Ruggiero during the mid-1940s over the bases of political action—and the sources of Europe's recent political disasters.

⁷²Chester McArthur Destler, "Some Observations on Contemporary Historical Theory," *American Historical Review* 55 (1950): 504, 517.

⁷³For a discerning account of the debates among Italian exiles in America during this period, see Dante Della Terza, "L'immagine dell'Italia nella cultura americana, 1942-1952," in his *Da Vienna a Baltimora*, 103-121, especially 108-12.

kingly anointment performed by the Goddess History through her idealistic high-priests." Indeed, continued Borgese, "all the books and essays of Croce had played into the hand of Mussolini."⁷⁴ Equally central was the anti-Croce posture of Gaetano Salvemini, an admirable humanitarian in many respects and a respected teacher at Harvard. Though he admitted in his more candid moments that he lacked the aptitude and temperament to penetrate Croce's ideas, Salvemini's Harvard post gave him a certain authority in the United States. And he seized every opportunity to heap scorn on Croce's thought and, after the fall of fascism, his immediate political posture as well.⁷⁵ Introducing the first edition of A. William Salomone's pioneering study of Giolittian Italy in May 1945, Salvemini referred disparagingly to the "pitfalls of 'idealistic' historiography, according to which (with Dr. Pangloss) everything which is real is rational and everything which is rational is good."⁷⁶

Borgese and Salvemini were among the contributors to a pamphlet published in Boston in 1946 that bitterly criticized Croce's brand of liberalism and historicism and his role in the political debates that surrounded the end of the war. Though written in Italian, this tract provides vivid testimony that it had become open season on Croce among Italians with American connections.⁷⁷ To be sure, Croce also found defenders among knowledgeable Italians and Americans during the years surrounding the end of the war.⁷⁸ But the fact that, by the mid-forties, he had gotten caught up in seemingly parochial Italian polem-

⁷⁴ Borgese, *Goliath*, 23, 295-302. See pp. 23, 297-98, and 299 for the passages quoted.

⁷⁵ Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sul fascismo* vol. 3, ed. Roberto Vivarelli (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974), 440, 452. On Salvemini's influence during this period, see H. Stuart Hughes, *The Sea Change: The Migration of Social Thought. 1930-1965* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 82-100. See especially 87-89 on Salvemini's differences with Croce.

⁷⁶ Published in 1945 as *Italian Democracy in the Making*, Salomone's book was republished in 1960 as *Italy in the Giolittian Era: Italian Democracy in the Making* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press). See p. xiv, in Salvemini's introduction, for the passage quoted.

⁷⁷ Giuseppe A. Borgese et al., *Benedetto Croce* (Boston: Edizioni "Controcorrente," 1946). Among the other contributors was Nicola Chiaromonte, who characterized Croce as "Pangloss reborn." See p. 48. Though such characterizations were ill-considered, the aging Croce was ill-suited for the political role he found himself called upon to play after fascism, and some of his political choices were indeed ill-advised. See David D. Roberts, "Benedetto Croce and the Dilemmas of Liberal Restoration," *The Review of Politics* 44, no. 2 (April 1982): 214-41.

⁷⁸ N. Orsini, "Benedetto Croce During the War Years," *Italica*, 23, no. 1 (March

ics was bound to compromise his stature among the Americans, who had not been sure what to make of him in the first place.

Croce remained a major figure but was poorly understood.

Despite the limits of his impact and the vicissitudes of his reputation, even in the United States Croce was one of the best known European intellectuals during the last several decades of his life. And he remained taken for granted as a major figure for roughly two decades after his death in 1952. In his influential *Consciousness and Society* (1958), H. Stuart Hughes included Croce with Freud and Weber as the central figures in the extraordinarily innovative generation of intellectuals that came of age around 1890. Hughes was himself attracted to Croce; as he had written the book, he noted, “the tranquil persuasiveness of Croce has been ever with me.” But even Hughes proved unable to do justice to the essentials of Croce’s thought—for example, the radical immanence of the spirit in Croce’s conception.⁷⁹

Writing with the promise of social science at its peak, Hughes linked the development of usable methods in the social sciences to the preservation of the rational enlightenment tradition, which he found still the best bulwark against the damaging irrationalism that had led to fascism. Hughes’s readers could only have come away with an uncertain sense of Croce’s enterprise, for Croce, despite his anti-fascism, had remained a persistent critic of the Enlightenment tradition. Thus his efforts to delimit the cultural role of science and to deflate the pretensions of the new social sciences. Croce had apparently been outside the mainstream, and by the 1950s his humanistic historicism could easily seem anachronistic. Destler noted that Croce was “abysmally and contemptuously ignorant of modern science,” and even Patrick Romanell, sometimes a more sympathetic commentator, charged that Croce, in restricting science, was inflating philosophy in order to estab-

1946): 1-3; Maria L. Cortone, “Benedetto Croce” (summarizing a lecture by Arthur Livingston of Columbia University in October 1943), *Italica*, 20, no. 4 (December 1943): 214-15. *Italica* was the journal of the American Association of Teachers of Italian.

⁷⁹ Thus he found as one of the most dubious features of Croce’s thought “its insistence on the pervasive role of a quasi-deity called ‘the spirit’,” essentially derived from Hegel. See H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1958), 208. See also p. 26. Hughes was well versed in modern Italian culture, even confessing on p. 433 that he had borrowed heavily from the work of Carlo Antoni and Pietro Rossi in putting his book together. Thus it is all the more striking that in his recent memoir *Gentleman Rebel* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1990), pp. 160-61, Hughes, in recalling his personal encounters with Croce in Italy at the end of World War II, says that Croce left little impression on him.

lish a Hegelian certainty.⁸⁰ Such characterizations did not begin to make sense of Croce's way of placing science, philosophy, and historical understanding within the overall cultural economy.

In 1972, the thought of Croce, twenty years after his death, still attracted the attention of such important intellectuals as Monroe Beardsley, Max Fisch, and Louis Mink, each of whom participated in a major symposium on the Crocean legacy at the University of Delaware that year. This event, however, hardly lived up to its promise. The proceedings were published by a little known German-American publisher in a typescript format that, to the reader who chanced upon the book, could only have suggested that Croce was an obscure, minor figure.⁸¹ In the two decades that followed, no comparable scholarly meeting was devoted to his intellectual legacy.

In the Shadows of Vico and Gramsci

Beginning in the 1960s, Croce was relegated to the shadows as Giambattista Vico and Antonio Gramsci became enormously influential in American intellectual life. Interest in Vico developed partly through the laudable and tireless efforts of Giorgio Tagliacozzo, founding director of the Institute for Vico Studies, to show the wide relevance of Vico's work to the contemporary humanities. But as Vico came to prominence, it became *de rigueur*, as in major works by Donald Verene and Michael Mooney, to deplore Croce's alleged idealist deformation of Vico, based especially on the assumption that Croce, as a Hegelian, had afforded privilege to conceptual thought.⁸²

⁸⁰ Destler, "Some Observations on Contemporary Historical Theory," 504; Patrick Romanell, "Romanticism and Croce's Conception of Science," *Review of Metaphysics* 9 (March 1956): 505-14.

⁸¹ L. M. Palmer and H. S. Harris, eds., *Thought, Action, and Intuition: A Symposium on the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce* (Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1975). In a telephone conversation with the author in May 1994, Professor Palmer explained the circumstances that led her to settle for this publication strategy and expressed her hope that the proceedings might yet be republished in an appropriate format.

⁸² In Verene's view, Croce ended up linking Vico to an "absolute idealism" that seeks "to comprehend being as a progressive movement of categories," and that offers only the wisdom of the concept, as opposed to the imaginative or poetic wisdom that Vico uncovered. See Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 217; see also pp. 23, 68-69. Although his account of Vico differed from Verene's, Mooney, too, assumed at the outset that he needed "to run clear of the Idealist framework with its epistemological orientation, which Benedetto Croce had imposed on Vico interpretation." See Michael Mooney, *Vico in the*

Croce offered
Vichian
recasting of
Hegel.

In fact, however, Croce took over wholesale Vico's notion of the autonomy of the creative imagination. Thus he could agree with Verene's crucial point that the imagination does not provide images of something—something already here.⁸³ That was precisely the insight that attracted those like Joel Spingarn to Croce in the first place. To be sure, Croce insisted on an ongoing role for the rational concept as well, but he related imagination and cognition in a circle to emphasize that neither is higher or final. "Poetry" wells up continually, and thus the endless openness and creativity of the world. There is no scope for Hegel's definitive overcoming or telos. Knowing Croce only from a distance, recent American Vichians have failed to grasp that Croce offered not a Hegelian deformation of Vico, but a Vichian recasting of Hegel.

As Vico was gaining currency, a considerable vogue of Gramsci was also developing among historians and critics.⁸⁴ "Hegemony" was everywhere. Even if only by implication, studies of Gramsci fostered the notion that insofar as there had been an especially innovative moment in Italian intellectual life, centering on Croce and Gentile, earlier in the century, it had found its most notable fruit in Gramsci's work. From this perspective, Croce had been a major source of Gramsci's innovative, culturally sensitive brand of Marxism. But Croce had then succumbed to Gramsci's withering critique in his *Prison Notebooks*, published posthumously in the late 1940s. Some American students of Gramsci shaded Gramsci's charges of conservatism against Croce in

Tradition of Rhetoric (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), xi; see also pp. 26-29.

The anti-Crocean reading of Vico in the United States stemmed partly from the influence of Pietro Piovani's "Vico Without Hegel," in Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White, eds., *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), 103-23. See also Hayden White's critique, "What Is Living and What Is Dead in Croce's Criticism of Vico," originally in the same volume, reprinted in Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁸³ Verene, *Vico's Science*, 33. For Croce's way of making the point, see, for example, *Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale* (Bari: Laterza, 1958), 242-44, 254-56, 489.

⁸⁴ Though relatively limited in its range, John M. Cammett's *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1967) was central in bringing Gramsci to currency in the United States. Among the most prominent of those indebted to Gramsci was Eugene Genovese, a student of the American south and one of the most distinguished American historians of his generation. In conversations with the author in October 1993, Genovese stressed the importance of Cammett's work in bringing Gramsci's thought to his own attention—and to more general currency among historians in the United States.

the most negative way, suggesting at least indirect links between Croce and fascism.⁸⁵

In *Italian Marxism* (1983), Paul Piccone, editor of the influential radical journal *Telos*, marginalized Croce from a different angle as he sought to pit a more genuinely radical Gramsci against the “official” reading by Palmiro Togliatti and the Italian Communist party. Piccone sought to show how Gramsci’s thinking had developed from within a distinctively Italian radical tradition, based on a particular way of appropriating Hegel. Gramsci was connected to Hegel not through Croce and Gentile, but through Antonio Labriola and especially Bertrando Spaventa.⁸⁶ Labriola’s importance had long been recognized, but Piccone’s way of restoring Spaventa was intended to make it clearer that Croce, from within a generally liberal framework, had deradicalized Labriola’s Italian Marxism.

As interest in Gramsci grew, Croce found few who were prepared to take him on his own terms. Ernesto Caserta explored Croce’s relationship with Marxism from a generally Crocean point of view, but he settled for publishing his major work on the subject in Italy.⁸⁷ Still, Croce was central to three full-length scholarly studies published in the United States during the 1980s. They were disparate in approach, however, and they did not herald a Croce revival.

Edmund Jacobitti’s *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy* (1981), though useful on the Neapolitan tradition from which Croce emerged, seriously misrepresented Croce’s conception of practical life, ethical response, and the relationship of human being to the

⁸⁵ See Maurice A. Finocchiaro, “Croce as Seen in a Recent Work on Gramsci,” *Rivista di studi crociani* 21 (1984): 139-54, for a penetrating discussion of this tendency in one of the best books on Gramsci in English, Walter L. Adamson’s *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci’s Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980). Finocchiaro later contributed his own full-length study of Gramsci, *Gramsci and the History of Dialectical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), which offers the most extended and balanced account of Gramsci’s encounter with Croce in the recent English-language literature. See also Finocchiaro’s review essay on the present author’s *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism in Theory and Society* 18 (March 1989): 282-87. For another discerning account of Gramsci’s complex relationship with Croce’s thought, see William Hartley, “Notebook Ten and the Critique of Benedetto Croce,” *Italian Quarterly* 31 (winter-spring 1990): 21-42.

⁸⁶ Paul Piccone, *Italian Marxism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 22-23, 103.

⁸⁷ *Croce and Marxism: From the Years of Revisionism to the Last Postwar Period* (Naples: Morano, 1987).

growth of the world in history.⁸⁸ Suggesting that Crocean historicism had proven a dead end by 1915, Jacobitti's critical account simply buttressed longstanding charges of conservatism and passivity. This was hardly an interpretation to invite renewed attention to Croce.

The other two works were more appreciative. In *Benedetto Croce Reconsidered* (1987), M. E. Moss offered a clear, straightforward account of the fundamentals of Croce's philosophy, a useful beginning for those to whom Croce had become just a name. Seeking to place Croce in a wider European perspective, my own *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (1987) played down Croce's formal philosophy and emphasized the import of Croce's absolute historicism to the ongoing humanistic discussion that accompanied the eclipse of foundational philosophy.⁸⁹ It is striking that though all three books of the 1980s accented Croce's historicism and historiography, none was selected for review by *History and Theory*, the leading English-language journal on historiography and the philosophy of history.

Missed Connections and Ongoing Possibilities

Although Croce had some impact among American intellectuals, especially between the wars, the story of his legacy in the United States is largely one of misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and neglect. He has proven less influential among Americans than Dilthey, Weber, or

⁸⁸ Edmund E. Jacobitti, *Revolutionary Humanism and Historicism in Modern Italy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981). See, for example, pp. 152-54 for suggestions that Croce "surrendered human autonomy to the inevitability of history" and left humanity "with a lay religion that celebrated the past." The present author reviewed Jacobitti's book in the *Canadian Journal of History* 17, no. 2 (August 1982): 386-88. Jacobitti offered a comparably critical assessment of Croce's role in Italian culture in "Hegemony Before Gramsci: The Case of Benedetto Croce," *The Journal of Modern History* 52 (March 1980): 66-84. Daniela Coli's *Croce, Laterza e la cultura europea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1983) offers a useful corrective, but it is not likely to be translated into English.

⁸⁹ M. E. Moss, *Benedetto Croce Reconsidered: Truth and Error in Theories of Art, Literature, and History* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1987); David D. Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987). For a discussion of these two works, along with Caserta's *Croce and Marxism*, see Raffaello Franchini, "La filosofia di Croce nell'odierno mondo di lingua inglese," *Criterio* 6 (Spring 1988): 1-20. Croce also figures prominently in my more recent *Nothing but History: Reconstruction and Extremity after Metaphysics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), which treats the tradition of post-metaphysical thinking from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Derrida and Rorty.

Cassirer, than Heidegger or Gadamer, than Ortega y Gasset or Collingwood, than Lukács or the Frankfurt School. Among Italian thinkers, both Vico and Gramsci have had considerably greater impact. Yet there surely was scope for Croce's thinking to have played a more fruitful role.

To some extent, Croce's fate rested on mere contingencies, from poor translations to idiosyncracies in the intellectual agendas of some of those best equipped to appreciate his work. Such, as Richard Rorty reminds us, are the ways of our intellectual history, which often boils down to who happened to bump into whom. Potentially significant encounters—with Babbitt, with Becker, with Dewey, with White—got started but were somehow arrested.

In another sense, however, it is not surprising that Americans have misunderstood or sidestepped Croce—and not only because he wrote in Italian, and in an unfamiliar, seemingly Hegelian idiom. It was very hard to grasp the overall shape of his intellectual enterprise as it unfolded during his long life. He could appear a systematic philosopher, an aesthete, a literary critic, a historian, a liberal anti-fascist. He was all of them, yet none of those labels adequately represented his enterprise. Indeed, American efforts to characterize Croce during his lifetime bring to mind the blind men confronting the elephant.

Croce in America: elephant confronted by the blind.

Historical outcomes are always provisional, however, and there may still be scope for a more fruitful encounter, even a place for Croce within contemporary humanistic discussion in the United States as elsewhere. Certainly we are better able now, in light of the changes in the intellectual landscape over the last thirty years, to grasp the thrust of his absolute historicism, to appreciate its import, and to respond fruitfully to it. Although we are still wrestling with terms like historicism, aestheticism, and activism, as well as with dichotomies like experimental and speculative, or even thought and action, we are far better attuned to Croce's concerns than were his American contemporaries, with their confidence in, for example, the social sciences, or the Lockean understanding of liberalism.

In recent years, historians in the United States have gotten caught up again in the issues surrounding presentism and relativism that were associated with Becker and Beard sixty years ago. Central to that discussion has been Peter Novick's eloquent *That Noble Dream*, which, typically, mentions Croce only in passing.⁹⁰ Yet the discussion sur-

⁹⁰Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

rounding Novick's work cried out for a Crocean dimension. In the same way, many of the issues involved in the recent revival of pragmatism suggest that the dialogue between Crocean historicism and the Deweyan tradition, apparently aborted forty years ago, might fruitfully be revived today. Rorty's neo-liberalism recalls Croce's. And it is striking that Rorty, for all his debt to Dewey, pulled back from Dewey's accent on the cultural centrality of science to emphasize, in ways congruent with Croce's, the creativity of language and the historicity of the world.⁹¹

*Croce's
absolute
historicism
prescient.*

More generally, Croce was not so much anachronistic as prescient in his effort to delimit social science and to specify a radically historicist alternative. In developing his absolute historicism, in fact, Croce ended up addressing, in a now-unfamiliar idiom, a number of the problems at issue in the humanistic discussion revolving around neo-pragmatism, hermeneutics, and deconstruction—movements that have come to the fore as confidence in social science has waned. He was seeking a kind of post-metaphysical moderation, eschewing appeals to a transcendent or foundational sphere while heading off the tendency toward extremes that the post-metaphysical situation seemed to nurture. In recent years, a number of scholars in this country, from Rorty to David Kolb to Brook Thomas, have pursued similar aims, often mentioning historicism, yet virtually never considering Croce. Though he hardly merits the last word, Croce could fruitfully be placed in that discussion.⁹²

⁹¹ Roberts, *Nothing but History*, 107-108, 226-27, 231, 233, 234, 249-50.

⁹² Rorty's work has been particularly central; see, for example, his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also David Kolb, *The Critique of Pure Modernity: Hegel, Heidegger, and After* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991). My own recent *Nothing but History* seeks to contribute to this wider effort.