An Introduction to The Life and Thought of Benedetto Croce (1866-1952)

Philosopher of Naples

A lecture by Dain A. Trafton at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

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It is strange but true, as many a scholar can testify, that it is often harder to write a good twenty-page essay than it is to offload a two-hundred page book. Literary brevity requires steady focus and the strong bonds of coherence; long windedness may cover up many vices. As for general commentaries on the works of Benedetto Croce, the prolific historian, philosopher, literary critic, and patriot, the difficulties attendant upon brevity are especially intense. His life as a whole and especially his literary output were amazingly rich and varied. His published works in the Laterza edition run to over sixty volumes. What a lot he had to say, and all of it worth discussing. What a lot I had to leave out. Even deciding how to frame this general lecture on Croce, his life and thought, was not easy. Here is how I intend to proceed.

In 1936 Croce published a collection of what he called "exemplary" lives: short biographies of five men and one woman who lived in different periods of Italian history from the 13th through the 19th centuries. Croce called these biographies "exemplary lives" and named his book about them Vite di avventura, di fede e di passione--Lives of adventure, of faith, and of passion. According to Croce, these individuals are exemplary, not simply because they are admirable, which most of them are, but more importantly because they engaged fully in the world as they found it at their time and in their place, and thus illustrate to us how Croce thinks life ought to be lived in every age and everywhere: with a spirit of adventure, faith, and passion.

A fundamental Crocean dictum is that all history is contemporary history, by which he meant that all serious study of the past is informed by the problems and needs of the historian's own time. A serious historian, a true historian, Croce believed, would not write about the past unless he was led to it by meditation on the predicaments of the present. It was in this spirit that Croce described his chosen six lives in the Vite di avventura, di fede e di passione, and that I would like to introduce Croce himself to you. As you listen to my account of Croce's life tonight I hope

you will recognize that his life too was a life of adventure--though not, admittedly, the kind of adventure that would fill the pages of a novel by Alexander Dumas. His life was also a life of faith, though not of the Christian faith in which he was raised. And of passion--though not of the kind of passion that people think of first when they hear that word. Adventure, faith, and passion describe his life as a philosopher and teacher committed to the point of suffering and danger, driven by love.

This will not be a formal lecture in philosophy. To introduce Croce by talking for a solid hour about nothing but his philosophy would, I think, be too much. Nevertheless, Croce was among other things a great philosopher so we cannot avoid touching on some of the themes in his philosophical work that define its importance. First and foremost is his fierce defense of philosophy and more generally all humanistic endeavors, including literature, history, and art, against the prevailing modern notion that the physical sciences provide the only valid model for knowledge. The tendency to impose scientific method onto the humanities–literature, history, and the arts was a terribly destructive error in Croce's view, an error that he described generally as "positivism." He viewed it as a kind of intellectual imperialism, and his resistance to it is intimately related to a second theme of his work that I want to emphasize: his fierce defense of intellectual freedom and indeed of all kinds of freedom, which he held lie at the heart of human dignity. Not for nothing is Croce sometimes described as a kind of apostle of a "religion of freedom." Not for nothing is one of his best known books known in its English translation as History as the Story of Liberty. Croce was one of the great and true liberals in the classic sense of that term.

Finally I warn you that there will be a kind of hagiography in my account of the life and thought of this man. I admire him immensely. I hope that you will come to admire him too.

Croce is sometimes referred to as the "philosopher of Naples," and not without reason, for he lived in the city by choice practically his entire life, and he took an active interest in promoting it when he might have lived the comfortable life of a retired country gentleman like his parents for he was born in the wilds of the Abruzzo, far north of Naples, in the little town of Pescasseroli, from which his mother's family came and where they owned large estates, as did his father's family in neighboring regions. In Pescasseroli you can still see the handsome palazzo where Croce was born on the twenty-fifth of February, 1866, and where he seems to have experienced an almost enchanted introduction to life.

Modern Pescasseroli is the headquarters of the Parco Nazionale d'Abruzzo--the National Park of the Abruzzo--which is well worth a visit by lovers of mountain scenery and rural culture– a rural culture that springs from deep roots in European history. In 1866, it was still a truly wild place, "covered" as Croce remembers "for months by snow, a place from which one could not get out except on the back of a mule, where the mail arrived once a week if at all, there was no telegraph, and the fireside represented truly the warmth and intimacy of life, the life of the family." Croce left Pescasseroli while still young, but his mother kept the place alive in his imagination as it took shape. From her he heard spellbinding stories about the mountains of his birth: "Stories of adventurous hunts, of encounters with brigands, of fearful battles, of dangerous escapes, stories that blended with and became confused with scenes and figures from historical romances of medieval and feudal times and of exploits of war, which the young Croce read avidly and “which filled my imagination, stimulated by my mother who read many of them to me on winter evenings around the fire."

Luisa Sipari was his mother's name, and his reminiscences are full of her. She was the one who awakened in him a love of history--a passion for it that lasted all his life. And he imbibed

from her romantic and generous tastes that inform even his most severe and technical philosophical writings. It was she who introduced him to the great city of Naples–or perhaps I should say to the greatness of the great city of Naples, taking him on frequent outings to its monuments--its wonderful churches: Santa Chiara, San Domenico, San Lorenzo, San Gennaro: its monasteries and convents; its formidable forts and castles: the Castel Nuovo dominating the old port, Sant'Elmo soaring on its hill, the Palazzo Reale, and all the once-magnificent private palaces that line the streets of the historic center. With his mother he visited the bookshops too, where he developed the joy of browsing among and collecting the printed riches of the imagination.

Croce's father, Pasquale, was a more distant figure, but an important influence too--quietly at work in his study, managing the family estates back in the mountains, a powerful example to his son of peace and order and productive work. In his all-too-brief Autobiography (Contributo alla critica di me stesso) published in 1915, Croce writes, "My father acted on the traditional principal of honest Neapolitans: that a gentleman ought to mind his own business and that of his family, and keep out of political squabbles." As it turned out this was a style of life that Croce himself came to value, though one that events made it impossible for him to live.

At the age of nine Croce left his happy home for a boarding school run by priests, not far away--still in Naples--but far enough to force him into a totally different and harsher world. There he excelled in his studies, but not in what used to be called deportment, though in that department too he learned important lessons for life, as he explains in the Autobiography. “Since I was a spirited boy,” he writes, “and often in trouble for breaches of discipline, my masters in their admonitions used to contrast my conduct in ‘class’ with my conduct in ‘dormitory.’ But in the rough-and-tumble of school life I found that those who had claws with which to defend themselves were always able to win respect; and when I think of that lesson, and of the boyish feelings of

loyalty and honour which are fostered by living in contact with contemporaries of widely different characters, I can never join in the fashionable outcry against boarding-school education or agree in thinking it better for boys to be brought up at home." The need for claws to defend yourself in a dangerous world, a world of adventures, political adventures, intellectual adventures, all kinds of adventures--Croce was never prudish or prissy about admitting this hard fact of life. Indeed, in one form or another it was central to his political thought and his understanding of freedom, though let me say at once that he was never a proponent of violence, unlike many of his contemporaries--distinguished intellectuals some of them--on both the right and the left.

While at school, Croce began to write and publish critical essays in respected journals--no small achievement for a seventeen and eighteen year old. At school, he also lost the Christian faith in which he had been brought up by his parents. With wry humor, he describes how this loss was hastened, if not occasioned, by the pious instruction at school. Told that he should both love and fear God, Croce, who took things seriously, tried and to his chagrin discovered that he could not do all that he was supposed to. Fear God, he could, moved by the prospect of divine disapproval that might become eternal on Judgment Day, but to love God was not for him possible. He could love his mother and father, but not God. It was a simple fact that in his honesty he could not deny. What followed was confusion and anguish until the Principal of the school relieved his conscience in a quite unexpected way--by delivering a course of lectures on "the philosophy of religion," in the course of which, for Croce at least, the philosophy so obviously overcame the religion that at last, as Croce writes, "a day came when I saw and told myself plainly, that I had done with my religious beliefs."

So we might say, God died for Croce in school--at least the Christian God--and never revived. Later, however, meditating on history in the broadest terms, Croce recognized that

Christianity had had a vital, creative role to play in history--indeed, a role in the promotion of liberty--and he came to think that religion was necessary--some fundamental belief that can lift people above their normal selves, above mere egotism and sensuality, some ideal that will inspire them to great deeds, a faith to make them capable of passion and adventure in the creation of beautiful and noble things, in the creation of liberty. Croce believed he found the evidence to support such a faith in the story of history, and this was the faith that he adopted, though it was shaken from the very beginning of his adult life.

In July of 1883, Croce, having received his diploma at the liceo, went on vacation with his parents and sister to the little town of Casamicciola on the island of Ischia. There, on the night of 28 July, a powerful earthquake destroyed the town. Tons of rubble fell on Croce and his family, burying them for hours. When rescuers reached them at last, Croce's mother and father and sister were dead. Croce was alive but badly injured, and throughout the night, until he passed out, he had heard his father calling pitifully for help. Recuperating, he and his brother, who had not been at Casamicciola, were brought to Rome by a relative--Silvio Spaventa, one of those talented Neapolitans and southerners who abandoned the south to seek their fortunes elsewhere after the fall of the old Kingdom of Naples in 1860. There Croce healed as far as such wounds as he had received could ever heal. For the rest of his life, he walked with a slight limp.

Spaventa's kindly idea was to prepare his young relatives for a career in public service in the still-new, unified Kingdom of Italy. Croce, though grateful, never found this prospect appealing. At first his Roman days were full of grief--"These were the darkest and most bitter years of my life," he writes, "the only ones in which at evening, laying my head upon my pillow, I often ardently wished that I might not awake in the morning, and even formed thoughts of suicide." And when he began to recover his spirits, he realized that, as far as he was concerned, only work at the

things he cared about most--intellectual things--could make life worth living. His passion for these things, perhaps brought into painful focus by Casamicciola, made an ordinary career seem trivial.

During his three years with Spaventa, Croce enrolled in a course of law at the university, but spent his dearest hours in those small, ancient, often beautiful and amazingly rich libraries in which Rome abounds. He also attended lectures given by the philosopher Antonio Labriola, whom he got to know personally among the circle of Spaventa's friends. Labriola opened his mind to the broad current of thought known as "idealism"--Platonic in its origin, German in its characteristic 19th-century development--which emphasized the creative function of the mind and spirit. To Croce Spaventa's lectures offered a way of understanding human achievement, human history, that seemed far more satisfactory than the prevailing way of positivism. What Spaventa taught, Croce declares, "all unexpectedly, came as the answer to my urgent longing for a new and rational faith concerning life and its purposes and duties." He had lost the guidance of religious doctrines and at the same time he felt himself in danger of infection from the positivism that seemed to him increasingly to be little more than veiled egotism.

In 1886, Croce left Spaventa and returned to Naples. Although for a while he tried to divide his time between intellectual work and the labor of managing the family estates, which had absorbed his father, Croce soon discovered that he could afford to abandon the latter--first to an agent and later to his younger brother, Alfonso. He did so, and consequently devoted himself to intellectual pursuits that brought him fame and a joyful sense of having found freedom at last. He was just twenty years old.

The first fruits of freedom were marvelous essays on little-known aspects of Neapolitan history, some of which can be found today (often in revised form) in such volumes as La rivoluzione napoletana del 1799 (1911), I teatri di Napoli (1916), and Storie e leggende napoletane

(1919). Although later Croce sometimes disparaged these juvenilia as mere antiquarianism, there is a bit of almost Socratic irony in such disparagement. As recent studies have shown, even these very early works of local history are not lacking in deeper Crocean themes. In 1892, for example, he took the lead in founding a journal of local history aimed at stimulating civic pride in the great city, once the proud capital of a Kingdom that one could feel was losing its grandeur. Naples was becoming a problem, a particular case of the larger problem of the Mezzogiorno. The very name of his new journal bespeaks its aim: Napoli nobilissima--Most Noble Naples: A Review of Neapolitan Art and Topography. The point was to make the study of local history an inspiration to creativity and the exercise of human freedom in restoring the city and leading it forward. Thus even local history revealed itself as contemporary history.

In 1893, while engaged daily in the practical work of research and editing, Croce was suddenly moved to compose--pretty much in the course of a single day, as he tells us in the Autobiography--an essay entitled History Subsumed under the General Concept of Art. This essay puts forward for the first time an essentially Crocean idea: that historical study properly understood is not the mere collecting of facts and anecdotes, though those, of course, must be collected, nor is it a scientific enterprise, though a kind of scientific rigor--in checking facts, and so on--is of course necessary too. Rather historical writing at its best--historical writing in the true sense, Croce would say--expresses an intuitive grasp of the relevant meanings and patterns of the past. In fact, the historian operates much like an artist finding patterns in a maze of trees and clouds and flowers to make a landscape, or like a poet, finding meaning in the welter of human stories to make a novel or a poem.

Nine years later, in 1902, Croce developed this insight further in Estetica come scienza dell'espressione e linguistica generale, or as it is known more simply in its English translation,

Aesthetic, which identifies the way of the artist, poet, and historian as the primitive and fundamental form of knowledge, the true "science," if you will, prior to and independent of conceptual understanding. The great artists, poets, and historians--the Homers, the Thucydides, the Virgils, the Livys, the Shakespeares, the Tolstoys--create, through their aesthetic intuition and genius, stories that reveal to us the deepest truths. Their formulations shape our lives, our cultures, our civilizations. They are the creators of culture--"the unacknowledged legislators of mankind."

From aesthetic intuition, which for Croce always lies at the beginning of knowledge, Croce went on in later books to define three additional basic forms of knowledge and human activity, which he named logic, economics, and ethics. The books that he wrote on these topics, dense and very difficult works of technical philosophy, taken together, constitute what he called the "Philosophy of the Spirit." In spite of the appearance that the Philosophy of the Spirit was meant to constitute an all-encompassing philosophical system along Hegelian or Marxian lines--an over-arching framework within which everything can be understood, including the future--Croce resisted this interpretation, insisting that he was not a system builder like Marx or Hegel. In Croce, even his most basic categories--aesthetics, logic, economics, and ethics--are not closed but open to the possibility of further refinement and even radical change, and this openness is the basis of the possibility of human freedom. One of Croce's criticisms of Marx was that his thought led not only to closed political systems but more importantly to a closure in thinking.

For Croce, taking his orientation on this point from the great 18th-century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), there will never be, indeed cannot be, an end to history, given the essential freedom of the human spirit. The creative function of aesthetic intuition, which, remember, is for Croce the fundamental form of human knowledge, cannot be limited or predicted. It has taken many different forms throughout time and will continue to do so, always

adapting itself to the needs of the moment though sometimes thwarted by contrary tendencies of tyranny, stupidity, laziness and so on. Although civilizations will rise and fall, grow and decay, although Naples or Italy or Germany or any other nation may lose sight temporarily of what is beautiful and noble, creative human freedom remains in potentia always and everywhere, and it will not disappear as long as human beings are human beings. Thus, in the long run, Croce retained his faith through every crisis, everything from Casamicciola to Mussolini.

The publication of Aesthetic in 1902 and the volumes that completed Croce's elaboration of the "Philosophy of the Spirit" during the next decade or so brought him fame not only in Italy but also throughout Europe and America. A journal of general intellectual scope that Croce founded in 1903, La critica, enjoyed an international success. Honors followed. In 1910 he was appointed a life member of the Italian Senate, conferred in recognition of his stature as the preeminent man of Italian letters. Although he was never a professor--and never wished to be--fame brought disciples and students to Croce's door in Naples. One of these was a young woman from the Piedmont named Adele Rossi, who came seeking advice on a doctoral thesis. In 1914 she and Croce, 48 years old, were married. From this apparently happy union were born in due time a son, Giulio, who died as a baby, and four daughters--Elena, Alda, Lidia, and Silvia.

A family man, Croce began to take a wider interest in national politics. At the outbreak of the first world war, he at first took the position of a neutralist, publishing articles in La critica arguing that Italy had no national interest in becoming involved, but when the government declared war in 1915 he rallied to the patriotic side. If military action was to occur, he wanted Italy to come out victorious, which she did, in a sense, but it was not a happy victory. The expense in blood, money, and loss of political cohesion left the nation embittered and divided. In the aftermath of the struggle against the Austrians and the Germans, Italians began to fight each other. Extreme

parties--including Fascists and Communists--drew people away from the old, broadly liberal center and began to threaten the constitutional regime, the precious--at least from Croce's point of view--political legacy of 1870. This was the period when the flamboyant poet and novelist Gabiele D'Annunzio, supported by Mussolini, occupied the city of Fiume with his Arditi. It was the period of workers' "occupation of the factories" in Turin and Milan, and of many other less famous acts of defiance of constituted authority. In this atmosphere of crisis Croce felt compelled to become more involved. When invited by Giolitti to join his government in 1920 Croce accepted and became Minister of Public Instruction, thus lending his prestige to a last-ditch attempt to save the liberal center. Croce's personal sacrifice was not enough. Within a year, Giolitti fell, followed by even more ephemeral coalitions of the center until the general strike of 1922 set the stage for Mussolini's march on Rome and the fateful decision by the King, Vittorio Emmanuele III, to ask the Fascists to form a government.

At first Croce supported the King's decision reluctantly, seeing it as a kind of necessary evil against the growing disorder in the body politic. Fascist thuggery--beatings, forced purgations by castor oil, even murders–became common, but there were disorders on the left too, and at this moment in history, only a few years after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Croce apparently considered the left a greater threat than the right. In the short term he was wrong, but in judging his misjudgment, we should remember certain important facts. That the first Fascist government, for example, was, technically at least, constitutional, having been called into existence by the King. And that the government included ministers from other parties besides the Fascists. It was not unreasonable to suppose, as Croce did, that the Fascist government would pass like others after order had been restored, that it would end up being nothing more than a short-lived expedient. Moreover, Croce had a personal reason to justify hoping for the best. The new Minister of Instruction, Giovanni Gentile, was a distinguished philosopher and a personal friend. Indeed,

Gentile's first important action upon taking office was to propose--and eventually institute--a thorough-going reform of the school system along lines that Croce himself had laid out--in fact, with Gentile's collaboration–earlier under Giolitti.

As Mussolini's real aims became clearer, however, as he abandoned all pretense of constitutional rule, closing opposition newspapers, excluding all except Fascists from his government, declaring all other parties illegal, and decreeing that no legislation could be finally approved except by him, Croce's reluctant tolerance turned to opposition. In 1925, when to Croce's dismay his friend Gentile issued a "Manifesto of Fascist Intellectuals," justifying what was essentially a coup d'etat by Mussolini, Croce responded by issuing a passionate counter manifesto, an anti-Fascist "Protest," attacking everything Gentile had approved. Signed by a long list of respected intellectuals, the "Protest" made Croce at once, both within and outside Italy, the symbol of liberal resistance. The good arguments were on Croce's side, but for the moment, of course, the big battalions, the police, and the well-organized Fascist party were on the other, and no political leader who could contend with Mussolini in the public square appeared to follow Croce's intellectual lead.

After the "Protest" Croce retired to his home, which by this time was in the beautiful old Palazzo Filomarino, which you can visit today the next time you go to Naples. It's on via Benedetto Croce just down the street from Santa Chiara. There one night in 1926 Croce and his wife Adele and the girls woke to the sound of shattering glass and breaking furniture. Fascist bullies had broken in and were destroying whatever they found in their path. They fled when Croce and Adele, appeared, just out of bed but apparently ready for a fight, as fierce and full of martial vigor as a couple of the medieval Lombard aristocrats whom Croce admires in the History of the Kingdom of Naples.

News of this fascist outrage, hardly covered by the press in Italy, received wide-spread attention throughout Europe and the United States, and may have frightened Mussolini. In any case, although Croce continued to suffer various forms of harassment--he was banned from public appearances, kept under constant surveillance; his very name could not be mentioned in the newspapers--he was never again attacked with physical violence and he was allowed to continue his intellectual work and even to publish in relative peace. La critica was practically the only place in Italy in which one could read criticisms of the regime, criticisms that got under Mussolini's very thin skin, but which he chose to ignore as though to show his disdain for a mere philosopher. On one occasion, Il Duce went so far as to boast scornfully that he had never bothered to read a word of Croce. To which Croce, when he heard of it, replied that this seemed strange because Mussolini had in fact quoted him more than once in writing. But even so, Croce added, perhaps Mussolini had got it right for it was well known that his works were written by others.

In some ways, the Fascist years (1925-1943) were a boon to Italian literature, because Croce's enforced seclusion led to an increase in his already enormous productivity. Many of his greatest works date from this period--especially his best-known works of history: the Storia del regno di Napoli (1925); the Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915--mille otto cento sessant'uno al mille nove cento quindici (1928); the Storia dell'eta barocca in Italia (1929); the Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono (1932); and his fullest theoretical statement about the nature of history and the art of writing about it--La storia come pensiero e come azione (1938). In these works, all the great themes of Croce's life come together--his opposition to positivism, which reduces life to facts and morality to egotism, his celebration of aesthetic intuition as the alternative to science, and his celebration of human freedom as revealed in history.

We come now to the last chapter, the last avventura, in our story--Croce's participation in the rebuilding of Italy after Fascism, his own fascinating account of which can be read in English in Croce, the King and the Allies: Extracts from a Diary by Benedetto Croce, July 1943-June 1944.

In late 1942, as the allied bombing of Naples increased in preparation for the Allied invasion of the Italian mainland, Croce, now 76, and his family left the city for refuge in Sorrento. Eventually they moved to Capri. As the Allies advanced from Sicily to the mainland and up the peninsula, leading to the fall of Mussolini, the armistice between Italy and the Allies, the occupation of Italy by the Germans, Croce entered into almost daily contact with individuals and groups, Italians, Americans, and British, planning for the rebuilding of the country. In these wide-ranging and complex discussions, Croce made himself a spokesman for one simple goal above all others--the creation of a new regime in which liberty could flourish. In pursuit of this goal he was ready to work with everyone except former Fascists. He was even willing to include the Communists, though he did not abandon his skepticism with regard to their ultimate intentions and especially their relationship to the Soviet Union.

One passage in his diary is especially revealing. It recounts his conversation with a Pole, identified only as Count G. Count G's deep cynicism leads him to judge what he calls German, Russian, and Anglo Saxon imperialism as all morally equivalent, a view that Croce, while not denying that Anglo Saxon imperialism is a force to be guarded against, cannot accept. “I asked him,” writes Croce, "When all is said and done, has German or Russian imperialism any new word to say to the heart of man?" He answered coldly, “Anglo-Saxon imperialism has no new word to say either." To which Croce replied, "But it does. The word is liberty."

During these final months of the war in Italy, Croce sought to help restore Italian self-respect and its diplomatic position by encouraging the organization of Italian army units to fight

beside the Allies, which in fact came to pass, thus setting Italian claws on the side of freedom. He also used his influence to ensure that the King, tarnished by his association with Fascism, would retire in favor of one of his sons until a plebiscite could be held to choose the new form of government. This too came to pass, with the result that the monarchy was abolished and replaced by a constitutional republic. Many wanted Croce to serve as head of an interim government, which he would not do, judging that he could best serve the country as a free writer and head of the Liberal Party, which he continued to do.

In his final years, essays and books continued to flow from his pen. I count at least fourteen volumes published after his eightieth birthday, which he celebrated by inaugurating and endowing the Istituto italiano per gli studi storici--the Italian Institute for Historical Studies--in a wing of Palazzo Filomarino, where it still flourishes and where you can visit it and see the scholars at work among the magnificent collection of Croce's own library--augmented of course by many subsequent acquisitions. Not long before his death, the philosopher wrote, "Now all life is a preparation for death, and there is nothing to do except go on living until death comes, attending with zeal and devotion to all the duties that belong to us." So it came to pass that Benedetto Croce, true to his faith and his passion, was minding his business like an honest Neapolitan gentleman on the morning of 20 November 1952 when death found him and ended his long and adventurous life, la sua vita di avventura, di fede e di passione.