

BENEDETTO CROCE

1866-1952

PERHAPS no name on the roll of the British Academy has been more popularly known in Europe than that of Benedetto Croce, born in 1866 and elected Corresponding Fellow in 1935. At least no philosophical theories of the last fifty years have been more widely discussed than his and those of Bergson, whom he more than once criticized with sympathy in difference.

The reasons for this popularity are clear. He was in the wide sense a humanist, applying his analysis to religion, morality, politics, and art as well as to logic. Though neither that analysis nor Bergson's is in the line of our fashionable trends, it is Croce who seems the less dated, perhaps owing to his conclusive attack on the Hegelian theory of the state, a theory supported in this country by Bosanquet, and to his criticism of the Fascist rule. In 1943, under that rule, he published an outspoken essay on *Liberalism and Democracy*, which, over any less famous signature, could not have escaped penalty. Gentile, his old friend and fellow student of Hegel, now a supporter of Mussolini, attacked him with great acrimony, but was always answered with perfect good nature.

There were, however, special reasons why Croce, as a writer on aesthetics should be known and honoured in this country. His most influential work *Estetica*, the first of three volumes in his system *Lo Spirito*, appeared in 1901, the year of Andrew Bradley's inaugural lecture on *Poetry for Poetry's Sake* from the Chair of Poetry at Oxford, and between the two there are remarkable similarities of approach and conclusion. The *Estetica* was the subject of a Romanes Lecture by Balfour at Oxford and of a paper communicated to the British Academy by Bosanquet. In 1929 Croce contributed the article on aesthetics to the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and considered that here and in his *Breviario di Estetica* his maturest views were to be found. In 1938 appeared Collingwood's *Principles of Art*, the most important English work of its period on the subject, which was a critical implementation of Croce. His *Historical Materialism and Karl Marx* was translated by Lindsay (Lord Birker), his *History of Italy 1871-1951* by Ady, and his *History of Europe in the XIX Century* by Furst.

Moreover, Croce made a direct impression of learning, originality, and personal charm as the occasional guest of his friend

J. A. Smith, for some years the *doyen* of the philosophical faculty at Oxford, and as the giver in 1933 of the Philip Deneke lecture on Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*. To the Academy he contributed the Italian Lecture for 1936 on 'Recenti Controversie intorno all'unità della storia d'Italia' (*Proceedings*, vol. xxii, pp. 57-68).

As a philosopher, as a literary critic of Dante, Shakespeare, Corneille, and Ariosto, as an historian and as a political controversialist, he remains, both for those who agree and those who differ, a valuable stimulus. In all these spheres his emphasis was on the worth of the individual and consequently of liberty. His *Soliloquy of an Old Philosopher* published in 1942 concludes thus:

A man whose mind is religiously disposed gladly leaves the care of political history to the politicians and soldiers and economists. He fixes his thoughts on moral history, where is unrolled the drama that also goes on in himself, and where throughout the centuries he meets his fathers and brothers who loved liberty as he does and who, like him, knew how to work and to suffer for her.

And in 1945 his *My Philosophy*, after extenuating the 'my', ends thus:

As to the future state of this philosophy of 'mine', like all others it will be superseded (as I have often superseded it in my lifetime and shall so long as I live and think) by the *unda quae supervenit undam*, by the growth and widening of the human spirit. And yet the truths which I have been able to discover and to establish remain and will remain. Great men or little men we can neither hope nor look for more than that.

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