

## Books

### What Is History?

*History: Its Theory and Practice.* By Benedetto Croce. Authorized translation by Douglas Ainslie. Harcourt, Brace and Company. \$3.75.

THE simple type of mind has always found in the graphic recital of events a satisfying "thickness" of reality (to use William James's term) discovered by the more sophisticated only in the formulation of general laws. The Homeric audience was more interested in the statement that Sarpedon clove Tleptolemus to the teeth or speared him in the stomach than they would have been in any disquisition on the economic or political causes of the Trojan war. Nor has this sort of interest died out. A Texan border newspaper known to me fills its personal and society columns with vivid descriptions of local shooting affrays, and the accounts of these pleasant little at-homes lay far more stress on the caliber of the weapons used and the nature of the wounds inflicted than on anything more subtle.

But the moment reflection begins, the tendency manifests itself to group and classify historical phenomena until finally some general law of all-embracing import is discovered. The Father of History himself thought he had found such a master-key in the secular strife of Europe and Asia and in the oscillation due to the alternate victory of the Oriental and the Occidental. From his time to our own "philosophies of histories" have flourished, and at no time more than at the present even if the phrase has gone out of fashion. To mention the product of the last few years only, we have seen Troeltsch's social-synthetic theory, Henry Adams's dynamic theory, Le Bon's psychological theory, Marvin's and Bury's discussions of the idea of progress in history, Teggart's "released energy" hypothesis, Spengler's morphology of history, Giddings's behavioristic-equilibration theory—not to mention the looser speculations of H. G. Wells and of Charles Richet. The history of historiography has interested scholars no less than its philosophy, and we have, in the works of Fueter, Joachimsen, Gooch, Ritter, Menke-Glückert, and Morel-Fatio, an impressive list of studies in this field, while we eagerly await the promised lucubration of Shotwell.

The work of Croce, therefore, as applied both to the theory and to the practice of historiography, lies in the full stream of contemporary thought. For more than twenty years he has studied the problems involved, and it is interesting to note, though no hint of it is given in the volume under review, that he has several times completely changed his position. The first form in which he grappled with the material led him into the disputation whether history was a science or an art. His earliest thesis, published in 1893, claimed that history was a science, the position then strongly supported by Bernheim and Villari, and subsequently argued by Bury. But the ink of this article was hardly dry when Croce reversed his opinion, and set forth the idea of "history reduced to the general concept of art." He then maintained that, as the human spirit could do only two things with a given object, either understand it (science) or contemplate it (art), and as history did the latter, it must be art in the wide sense. Later, in 1900, Croce again modified his ideas in the direction of drawing profound distinctions between history and the remaining arts, and of reestablishing the connection with other forms of thought, on the ground that history is in reality the technical basis, or datum, of philosophy, as cognition is the technical basis of will.

Occupied with other interests Croce left the subject in this condition until he was stimulated by the "Historiography" of E. Fueter—perhaps the most brilliant and profound historical achievement of the present century—to write a number of articles which appeared in Italian reviews during the years

1911-12, and which are now offered by Mr. Ainslie to the English-reading public. Though on the whole not comparable to Fueter, and though extremely difficult reading—for if Croce in Italian is "clarus ob obscuram linguam," his translator has not done anything to make him easier—the "Philosopher of the Spirit," as he calls himself, must be allowed to have made an important contribution to the subject.

His first elaborated position now draws a distinction between chronicle as an act of will and history as an act of thought, and follows this with the conclusion that "every true history is contemporary history." History is living chronicle, chronicle is dead history, for we should reverse the ancient maxim and should say: "first comes history and then chronicle." "Do you wish to understand the true history of a Ligurian or Sicilian neolithic man? First of all try to make yourself mentally into a Ligurian or Sicilian neolithic man; and if this be impossible, or you do not care to do this, content yourself with describing and classifying and arranging in a series the skulls, the utensils, the inscriptions belonging to those neolithic peoples." But this last is not history; it is mere pedantry. History is "that of the individual so far as he is universal and of the universal so far as he is individual." The whole thought was summed up with more power by an American with whom Croce, with all his wide reading, is unacquainted. You will find it in the first sentence of Emerson's essay on History: "There is one mind common to all individual men. . . . What Plato has thought any man may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done."

Asking how one can attain to this contemporary history which is the only true one, Croce first knocks down a number of predecessors with no more trouble than most thinkers have taken in accomplishing that necessary task. In the first place, the philologist can be "correct" but cannot be "true," because philology spontaneously dissolves under criticism, and because it relies on documents which can furnish only "extrinsic reason," whereas for conviction we require "intrinsic reason." But if the philologists imagine a vain thing, the writers of "cosmological romances," that is, all historians inspired by patriotic, humanitarian, oratorical, or didactic ideals, are still madder. After meting out this severe justice to his predecessors, Croce assures us that "history never metes out justice but always justifies." So thoroughly is the work of destruction done, so complete the skepticism implied by the process, that one's eagerness to know what history truly is becomes almost unbearable before it is finally revealed that history is identical with philosophy, for both are forms of knowledge of the eternal present. At this point Croce might lay himself open to severe criticism, did not his position finally amount to a complete mysticism and his "gnoseology" (as he calls it) to the simple assertion "quod nihil scitur." History and philosophy may indeed be equated when each seems to be equal to zero.

As a matter of fact, however, Croce does not rest in the Nirvana of complete negation but comes to life again with the argument that history, being philosophy, must deal with the spirit. Thus there is a certain truth, he admits, in the doctrine of Vico and Hegel, but only with a qualification that practically eviscerates their speculations by annihilating their dualism. History is indeed the work of reason or of providence, but we must take care not to assume that these abstractions take any extra-human form, whether as God, as nature, as fate, as spirit of the time, as genius of the race, or as what not. These ideas are seen only in individuals, and so identify the universal and particular that we cannot speak of the wisdom of the "idea" or of the "spirit," and of the folly or illusion of individuals. Thus it is that Croce's mysticism becomes materialistic.

In the second part of his book the author passes in review the various schools of historiography with many a discerning

criticism of each. The Graeco-Roman school he finds poetic, pessimistic, apodictic, and pragmatic (by the last two words is really meant "didactic" and "political"). The Middle Ages, with Augustine, brought in the idea of progress, i.e., of rationality and providence. Eusebius also found a more universal interest in religion than the Greeks, even Polybius, had found in the mutual relationship of states. After this came the Renaissance, which found in history "the adequate foundation of the sciences," and defined it as "the knowledge of single things of which it is useful to preserve the memory for the purpose of living well and happily." Followed the Enlightenment with its discovery that "the true ancients, i.e., the men of most expert and mature mind, were the moderns." Reason was worshiped as the universal guide to all happiness and the general criterion of all values, thus replacing, or rather simply transforming, the medieval ideas of providence, redemption, and the millennium. The discovery of such constantly operating forces as geography, government, and religion, the invention of the phrases "spirit of the time," "genius of the people," were but so many attempts to put causality into the universal order.

After the rationalists the Romantic school inaugurated what Croce well calls "nostalgic" history. Their main idea was to "restore" a long lost time, to make vivid the habits of men of bygone ages. These men first learned to justify everything, Socrates and his judges, Shakespeare for his style and Voltaire for finding fault with his style. Even Karl Marx voiced a grandiose eulogy of the bourgeoisie in the very Manifesto intended to put an end to it. Each age was now judged solely by itself, and each man according to his own lights.

Finally came the positivist or scientific historians, with their demand for the integration of historical events, for the unity of narration and document, and for the idea of the immanence of development. Their complete neutrality and objectivity Croce finds impossible, even in the great Ranke. Masterpiece though his history of the popes was, for example, it fell into the dilemma of trying to represent the papacy neither as a divine institution, nor as a lie, though Croce claims that there is no third possibility. In fact, the positivists, or naturalists, or critics, or sociologists, or whatever the new writers called themselves, really had a philosophy even while disclaiming it. It is not even possible to prove or disprove miracles from the purely philological method; one finds in history what one seeks in it; the inquirer ever comes out of the door by which he enters. This is the end and the climax of Croce's thought, that historical research must not only be based on but must be identical with philosophy.

In conclusion, it must be repeated that this book is well worth the painstaking study it requires. If I have here and there questioned its results it is less from the desire to pick flaws in a fine work than in obedience to an injunction of Croce himself. In another work, he compares the reviewer who is content with paraphrasing an author to the German audience which frequently add their vocal efforts to the music of the orchestra and for whose admonition are posted up the signs "Mitsingen verboten." In the present instance I have endeavored to give, with a just appreciation of the book, enough of my own "reactions" to furnish sport to the audience. PRESERVED SMITH

## Maxwell Bodenheim

*Introducing Irony.* A Book of Poetic Short Stories and Poems.

By Maxwell Bodenheim. Boni and Liveright. \$2.

IT is a tragic temptation to shuffle the American poets and look for the aces. I am foolish enough to yield to the temptation and, with hesitant gesture rather than assurance, to lay them on the table. If Mr. Robinson, Mr. Fletcher, Mr. Aiken, and Mr. Bodenheim are not the real aces (and I regret that my pack, not intended for pinochle, limits me to four aces), I still believe that Mr. Bodenheim is one of the four. He does not seem

to be as well known as he should be, being a poet for partly "unpoetic" reasons.

Mr. Bodenheim has been called a poet of word overtones. This is a true statement so far as it goes, but it is a little misleading. He gets his "overtones" not by insisting on the word, not by listening hard for the dying clang of its marginal associations, but by a somewhat high-handed, and therefore refreshing, method of juxtaposition. His words, as he sets them down in sequences, make strange companions. They put each other to acid tests, cutting irrelevances out of each other's vitals, and constructing themselves into lines of thought that have the freshness of corroded contours. Mathematics runs through all of his work, as he himself explains in the exhilarating Talmudic exercise entitled *An Acrobat, a Violinist, and a Chambermaid Celebrate*. Take this passage from the *Turmoil in a Morgue*:

"Impulsive doll made of rubbish  
On which a spark descended and ended,  
The white servant-girl, without question or answer,  
Accepts the jest of a universe."

It is a summary, very precise and appropriately impertinent, of the white servant-girl's erotic experience and cosmic philosophy. It has almost as little grease in it as one of those tortuously simple demonstrations, that we remember to have witnessed, of Euclid's more difficult theorems.

What makes Mr. Bodenheim a poet, and not merely a surgeon and applied geometrician, is his fancy. This quality of his work appears even more clearly in *"Minna and Myself"* (which deserves a vastly greater accessibility than its publishers have given it) than in the present volume. In *Old Man, Seaweed from Mars*, and a number of other pieces the fancy is elaborate and, if artificial, legitimately so. Numerous images, such as "the rock-like protest of knees," have a value far beyond that of a merely intellectual symbolism. Yet it cannot be denied that Mr. Bodenheim's fancy plays with less abandon in *"Introducing Irony"* than in his previous work. His passion for the knife has led him to prune too much; in excising the irrelevant he has also cut into the quick of his imagination and drained it of some of its life-blood. It is a pity that bitterness should have made a murderer of his fancy. In *"Minna"* it was more of a dreamer. And *"Minna,"* while less fiercely exact, is better poetry.

The sardonic intellectualism of this book proceeds not from heartlessness, not truly from philosophic aloofness, but from suffering. It is impossible to disentangle the poet's love and his hatred, to sever derision from his pity. Irony is here a substitute for tears. The following passages from *The Scrub-Woman*, significantly styled "a sentimental poem," illustrate Mr. Bodenheim's method of dodging the direct expression of the pity that he feels:

"Time has placed his careful insult  
Upon your body. . . .  
Neat nonsense, stamped with checks and stripes,  
Fondles the deeply marked sneer  
That Time has dropped upon you. . . .  
When you grunt and touch your hair  
I perceive your exhaustion  
Reaching for a bit of pity  
And carefully rearranging it."

And perhaps the paralyzing turmoil of love and hate has never been more poignantly rendered than in the closing lines of Jack Rose:

"And when her brother died Jack sat beside  
Her grief and played a mouth-harp while she cried.  
But when she raised her head and smiled at him—  
A smile intensely stripped and subtly grim—  
His hate felt overawed and in a trap,  
And suddenly his head fell to her lap.  
For some time she sat stiffly in the chair,  
Then slowly raised her hand and stroked his hair."

EDWARD SAPIR