

Norberto Bobbio and Benedetto Croce

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1. My acquaintance with the two philosophers

In my contacts with Bobbio, which took place over a span of twenty years, Benedetto Croce played a major part.¹ We often talked about Croce when I visited Bobbio in his home on Sacchi Street in Turin, and we would both say in unison ‘it’s amazing!’ (‘it’ being his activity as a philosopher, scholar, cultural and editorial promoter, and his importance in Italian political history). When I mentioned that I was contemplating writing a book on Croce (which eventually never happened), he advised me both regarding content and editorial tactics, and above all was amazed and pleased that someone like me, born in 1959,² was a devoted admirer and a passionate scholar of Croce.

Among the professors and intellectuals whom I have personally met, Bobbio was the first who was not only a great connoisseur of Croce’s work but also an admirer of his intellectual and moral personality.

During secondary school (the Italian ‘liceo classico’ type) I studied philosophy for three years, each year with a different teacher, but no one discussed Croce. However, at my maternal grandfather’s home there were some old editions of some of Croce’s works (with the publishing house Laterza). When I was eighteen, I found there a copy of Croce’s ‘Aesthetics’ and I brought it with me to the city of Terni, where I had been called for the then-obligatory three-day medical visit for military draft. It was love at first sight: the logical precision, the clarity of presentation, the beauty of the language and the persuasiveness of the theoretical theses, almost always accompanied by examples drawn both from life and from a vast and varied set of cultural references, won me over. I had never read anything of the kind in secondary-school manuals or in the collections of passages by philosophers that had been suggested to me, nor in the books on philosophy and human sciences that, from time to time, I bought during my adolescence, guided by the most popular intellectual trends of the time (in the second half of the 1970s structuralists were in vogue, and I remember buying – at a newsagent! – *Tristes tropiques* and *Structural Anthropology* by Claude Levi-Strauss).

When I attended philosophy for a year at the Catholic University of Milan, I would always go to the lectures by Sofia Vanni Rovighi (these were her last years as professor emerita). She was a true master of unsurpassed rigour, alien to any

Originally published in Ivan Pozzoni (ed.), *Benedetto Croce. Teoria e Orizzonti*. Milan: Limina Mentis, 2010, pp. 229–79.

verbal prestidigitation, and an expert in scholastic and neo-scholastic philosophy; she was also imbued with that philosophical ‘historical method’ which, a few years later, I understood to be a direct legacy of Croce’s teachings in Italy. But she was very much affected by the apologetic context of early twentieth-century Catholic schools; as a result, when she quoted Croce, she did so only in the *pars destruens* sections of her arguments. At least she had not forgotten him.

The following year I entered the Scuola Normale in Pisa, where among the teachers were Nicola Badaloni, Remo Bodei, Gianfranco Contini, Furio Diaz, Giovanni Nencioni and, most importantly, Eugenio Garin. None of them spoke about Croce, and Garin, although indirectly, argued rather against the ‘philosophy of the four words’ (as Gentile mockingly called Croce’s philosophy), as he did against any philosophy that wanted to be ‘theory’ and not – as Garin would have liked – textual philology and cultural chronicle.³ Only years later, reading Garin’s books, did I recognise in him a great connoisseur of Croce, at least with regard to Croce’s role as an organiser of culture, although not concerning Croce’s theoretical contributions. In Pisa at the time – it was 1979 – Marxism was already no longer fashionable, while well-regarded topics included: Nietzsche and the Presocratics, discussed by Giorgio Colli (who had recently died) and by Severino (who was becoming fashionable); Chomsky and his generative-transformational grammar; Wittgenstein, studied by Aldo Gargani; and, although less so, Popper, examined by Marcello Pera.

When studying at the Scuola Normale each year I had to choose a topic for my ‘interview’, an oral presentation of a year-long research project. The first year, I chose Book Delta of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, but for the second-year project I immersed myself in Croce’s work and in Italian culture of the early twentieth century. I presented my research to them⁴, but it left them all cold or, in any case, silent. Thinking about it today, after so many years, I would interpret that silence as probably due to hostility rather than mere indifference.

Everything changed when I decided to write my degree thesis on Piero Gobetti⁵. Having chosen as supervisor and co-supervisor two professors from the university’s history department – Franco Sbarberi and Claudio Pavone⁶ – I came into contact with a completely different environment.⁷ I visited for my research the Piero Gobetti Study Centre in Turin, where I met its director Carla Gobetti and its president Norberto Bobbio, with both of whom I had then been in contact for many years. In Turin, Croce was remembered – at least at that time – much more fondly than in Pisa, which rather preferred Gentile. This state of affairs came into being for various reasons: because of Piero Gobetti’s admiration for Croce, because Croce often came there in person, because of Croce’s friendship with Ada Gobetti, and due to the presence of an intellectual like Bobbio, alien to cultural fashions, and venerating historical memory in general and that of ‘masters and companions’ in particular.⁸

Vanni Rovighi loved philosophy but she didn’t love Croce; Garin loved neither; only in Bobbio had I finally found someone who loved both Croce and

philosophy.⁹

2. Bobbio's relation with Croce

'Croce was the voice of his time: to be on his side was synonymous with being in the flow of history. Accepting Croce's thought gave one confidence, infused trust, opened up new vistas for research.'
Norberto Bobbio

In 1978, Bobbio wrote an article where he celebrated 'his little Crocean anniversary', that is, his first intellectual encounter with Croce's writings. In 1927 Leone Ginzburg had given him Croce's *Nuovi Saggi di Estetica*, and in 1928 Bobbio bought himself *Storia d'Italia* and then, gradually, he acquired all, or nearly all, of Croce's works.

In these fifty years I have never stopped reading and re-reading. In this sense I am right, I believe, to speak of a personal anniversary. I read and re-read Croce on the most diverse occasions. For example, to draw inspiration: a few years ago, having to write an introduction to the essays of a philosopher of my generation killed by the Germans, I re-read the beautiful pages dedicated by Croce to Poerio, 'a family of patriots'. Two years ago, I revised Vico's monograph for a course of lectures and I felt again, upon rereading it, the same sense of surprise and intellectual excitement that I had felt the first time. Recently, having got involved in a dispute about optimism and pessimism, I asked for help from a page of Croce's *Frammenti di Etica*. A lesson that lasted fifty years.

Croce the master teacher, then.¹⁰

Bobbio, when he was barely twenty years old, sometime in the 1930s, once met Croce in person at the Villa Germano in Sordevolo, and – overawed – he did not exchange a single word.¹¹ Bobbio writes about another occasion, during the same period, but this time in Turin: 'I have never forgotten the short stretch of road I travelled alongside him when he left the National Library'. Croce asked him what he was studying and Bobbio replied 'Husserl', but Croce did not seem interested.¹²

Bobbio had 'never forgotten' that moment because at that moment he was talking face to face with his hero:

I belong to a generation that, at least at the University of Turin, naturally admired Croce. We were Croceans (and I am purposefully saying Croceans and not idealists) with the same confidence and with the same candour with which the generation

of our fathers had been positivist. It is only now, after so many years, that I can clearly make out the multiple components of our Croceanism. [...] I would distinguish a general component, that is Croceanism intended as an attitude to life, and a specific component, that is Croceanism as a research methodology. Each of us, on his own account and almost always in conflict with his professors, had embraced these components.¹³

Apart from Naples, Turin was then the most ‘Crocean’ city in Italy.¹⁴ Bobbio recounted this fact in concrete terms in his three books *Maestri e compagni*, *Italia civile*, and *Italia Fedele*;¹⁵ these are precise and engaging portraits of intellectuals and political militants from the first half of the twentieth century, all of whom, in one way or another, had been among Bobbio’s admired teachers and friends. In these essays there are direct references, or at least ideal comparisons, with Benedetto Croce. For example, here is a moving portrayal that Bobbio cites from Leone Ginzburg:

The initiation to Croce offered an unquestionable criterion for distinguishing [...] the enlightened from the ones groping in the dark, the modern spirits from the outdated ones, the ones freed from all sorts of dogmatic slumbers, from those who were still enveloped in the cobwebs of religious conformity, positivism, scientism, over-reliance on philological methods and so on. More than a doctrine [...] Croceanism was a method, in the sense of being a Royal Road to true knowledge [...]. Croce’s authority was undisputed: armed with his concepts we felt superior to our own masters, who they had not accepted them or had disdainfully rejected them.¹⁶

We can find scattered, admiring references to Croce in many of Bobbio’s other writings. On some occasions the references were more extended, for example in *Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano* and the already-mentioned *Italia civile*. Bobbio was grateful to Croce for many reasons, including protection from the ‘roughness and superficiality of naturalistic positivism’ and from the ‘irrationalism of existentialist philosophy’, as he wrote in his obituary:

Between one extreme and the other, Croce’s thought was a model of wisdom, of mental and moral equilibrium, of invincible coherence, which does not imply immobility. A philosophy of the world and for the world, but without complacencies or worldly weaknesses; on the contrary, a philosophy inspired by rigour, by an attitude to life which could well be called religious, and for this

reason a philosophy that moulds and educates, that arouses lofty intellectual vocations, that inspires moral and civil virtues.¹⁷

Croce was ‘enviously admired’ by Bobbio specifically for his philosophical contributions.¹⁸ We can see an aspect, although certainly not the most relevant, of this ‘envy’ in the admiration for Croce’s literary prolificacy; reviewing Fausto Nicolini’s work on Croce’s bibliography, he wrote:

as a bibliographer’s hunting ground, Croce’s work is, first and foremost, immense. Croce had the rare good fortune of being, just like Thomas Mann, precocious and long-lived. His first published work is an edition of the *Stanze per la giostra* by Poliziano, published in Naples in 1883 (he was then 17 years old); his last writings belong to the year of his death, which occurred at the age of 86, in 1952. Between the first and the last publications no less than seventy years have passed! In addition to being exceptionally extended in time, his activity as a writer was also incessant due to his strict dedication to work [...] and extremely fruitful due to his prodigious speed of conception and execution [...]. When the detailed bibliography of his writings is released, compiled by the Italian Institute for Historical Studies, let us hope that it will enable us to follow Croce’s work year by year. I foresee that we will be amazed.¹⁹

Bobbio wrote these lines in 1960. There is something of a paradox in reading one of Bobbio’s writings from 1983 in which he reviews the bibliography of his own writings²⁰ and is ‘dismayed’ to see that more than one thousand cards have been prepared by the bibliographer. And, since then, Bobbio would go on and live 20 more years! His first published work was in 1934, and his last in 2003; he too, like Croce, had a seventy-year-long publishing activity! And, like Croce, he too was endowed with a dedication to work that is out of the ordinary. The two men shared even more points in common. There were both made senators for life, Croce for the Kingdom of Italy and Bobbio for the Italian Republic. And, finally, Bobbio was the ‘Watchman for Israel’²¹ of Italian culture and society in the second half of the twentieth century, while Croce was the ‘lay pope’ of Italian culture and society in the first half of the same century.²²

The two scholars had some common intellectual masters, like Kant and Marx, but they mostly had different ones. Croce had Vico, Hegel, Herbart, De Sanctis, Ranke, Labriola, Mach, Avenarius; Bobbio had Hobbes, Locke, Cattaneo, Weber, Salvemini, Einaudi, Kelsen, Pareto. To a large extent Croce and Bobbio also dealt with different disciplines: Croce with aesthetics and art criticism, Bobbio with philosophy of law and political science. Croce was a systematic philosopher (similarly to Hegel), while Bobbio was not (similarly to

Cattaneo). And the two men – because of the 43 years of age which separated them – had to face intellectual and political problems of a very different nature, in the different conditions of the Italian society in which they lived.

Yet, as it transpires in the best of the many portraits of Croce that Bobbio left us,²³ which in my opinion is also one of the very best of such portraits among the myriad writings by scholars of Croce, Bobbio had for Croce a boundless admiration. Although dissenting from many of his individual doctrines and from many historiographical interpretations, two aspects of Croce's thought were fully shared by Bobbio. The first is his 'figure of the Philosopher', that is the model of how it was necessary in the twentieth century to live and communicate the mentality and role of those involved in philosophy. The second point is constituted by Croce's unsurpassed anti-fascist moral and cultural teachings, addressed to two generations of Italians during the twenty years of fascist rule.

Later on, we shall describe Bobbio's encounter with some of Croce's philosophical ideas in detail.

3. Sensibilities

'Croce liked to repeat that good philosophy did not arise from reading books on philosophy, but from the passionate and rigorous exercise of any spiritual activity'.
Norberto Bobbio, 1962

Bobbio observed:

the image of a Croce withdrawn into himself and into his work is false, as has been said several times. There are many testimonies as to his geniality, the depth of his affections, his generosity towards friends, his benevolence towards young people who turned to him for guidance.²⁴

We must not confuse different planes and hierarchies in life:

Croce never makes excuses or finds pretexts, although he could do so; his attitude is governed by the rule that one should not get lost in matters that are distractions from one's work (and his main duty is, above all, reading, writing, studying). On the contrary, he carries out any task as soon as possible, and almost always this leads to a rapid execution.²⁵

I experienced the same behaviour in my relations with Bobbio: he immediately picked up the phone when I called, and immediately answered my letters, although I was a nobody on the public scene, because I was 'a friend', even

though he, like Croce, was very busy with work and had for it the same dedication.

One of the reasons that drew Croce closer to Ada Gobetti was the consciousness of her suffering after the death of her husband Piero, as Bobbio recalls:

When we saw her for the first time – Croce told her many years later – she seemed to me like a wounded beast hiding in its burrow in order not to be seen by its fellow creatures. Then we saw her, little by little, relax and blossom again: it was a joy for everyone.²⁶

I clearly remember that on my first meeting with Bobbio, having observed and weighed me up with his humane sensitivity – he could have used the same expression ('wounded beast'). Either because that is what I actually was, or because, for many years, when we met he, first of all, would ask me how I was, if I was feeling sad, if I had friends and was no longer alone, if my practical and working difficulties were still ongoing or had been overcome.

Bobbio also reports another aspect of Croce's affectivity: 'Croce replies to Ada: "Your letter, as you can image, was of great comfort to me, because I am tied to old objects of affection and it is from these that I draw life's sweetness and the strength to endure everything else"²⁷

That is, friendship is a mutual exchange and nourishment (even if – as Aristotle had already noted in his treatise on friendship – different things are being exchanged), and the sweetness in it helps to sustain one's mission.

For his part, Bobbio intensely admired the idea and practice of friendship:

Leone Ginzburg had a cult of friendship. The sanity of his nature was shown also in the fact that rigour was not an end in itself, it had nothing to do with moralistic pedantry, with meticulous observance of personal duties, but was aimed at perfecting oneself, it was a path to the improvement of relations with others.

His usual scrupulousness [...] could lead one to believe that he followed an ethic of perfection; but, when in contact with other people, especially with his circle of friends, it was clear that he had in mind a broader ideal [...] an ethic of communion.

He loved conversation, company, the world [...] the things which were most interesting to him were living people, with their virtues, faces, oddities [...] with friends he was very amiable [...]

When we met, or when we visited him at his home, his heart would open. A friend was always welcome, a guest sent by the gods [...]. How many hours of our life we have spent together – hours that had an effect on our destiny, hours that cannot be erased from memory, intense hours, full of resolutions for the

future and of present affections, hours that were enjoyed minute by minute [...]

In our talks we were creating and destroying the world, we disrupted beliefs, received wisdoms, prejudices, we rummaged through the most hidden recesses of the soul, laid them bare, turned them upside down until the bottom was visible [...]

Leone helped me, he lent me a hand when I was hesitant, he encouraged me when I was disheartened; above all, he gave me the support of his indomitable strength accompanied by his captivating sweetness [...]. He put me at peace with myself, with others, with the things I did not understand [...]

To friends he gave all of himself, but he was, on the other hand, very demanding. Woe betide he who did not visit for too long or did not call him [...]. Friendship was a sacred fire, which had to be fed day by day so that it would not go out. Above all it represented, like love and perhaps more than love, the perfect example of a disinterested human relationship, devoid of any selfish motive and dominated only by the desire to be together with no other purpose than to enjoy the mutual benefits deriving from the exchange of the gifts of intelligence and of the heart [...]

The virtue *par excellence* that Leone practised and demanded and that marked my friendly relations with him, was sincerity [...]. Among the lessons we learned in those years, the one concerning absolute sincerity as the foundation of moral life was, for me, the most constructive [...]. Two fundamental rules: 1) friends must not have secrets; 2) each, in order not to have secrets before others, must not have secrets before himself [...]. The first rule required the exercise of frankness; the second of inner clarity. The observance of both implied an open war to all forms of simulation and dissimulation, a relentless hunt for hypocrisy (toward other people) and for comfortable pretexts (with respect to oneself [...]). I gradually realised that sometimes in front of Leone I felt ashamed of actions of which I had never been ashamed when I was alone with myself [...]. What would Leone have said? What would Leone have done?²⁸

These intense pages particularly remind me of an episode that took place long before I could read them. I was experiencing a period of painful sentimental crisis; it was during the Christmas holidays of 1997, and doctor De Masi (my esteemed psychoanalyst) was on holiday. I was and felt alone... and I had the idea and the desire to go to Bobbio, to tell him about my pain and to confide to him for the first time some delicate aspects of my private life. He told me to go to see him immediately. We spent a long winter afternoon in Via Sacchi, with me sitting

on an armchair that was too low and Bobbio above me sitting on a chair, bent over me as if to hear me better. After three or four hours the large room became semi-dark and then fully dark, but we did not want to move or look or read anything but just talk... Valeria, his wife, tactful and sensitive, didn't enter the room, not even to turn on the light... A month later I received a letter from him:

How are you? I haven't heard from you. I often think about you and your vicissitudes. Yesterday I had a visit from a scholar who was a great admirer of Croce, the same Croce whom you have always considered a teacher, and I thought about what he would have told you if you had met him. I realise that I have not been able to give you the slightest help. Yet, I continue to trust your resoluteness in facing the difficulties of life, a resoluteness you have given me proof of in your honesty, in your friendship and in the value you give to friendship. Consider these few lines as nothing more than a proof of friendship.²⁹

Bobbio attributed happiness, if it can be had at all, to friendship, as he wrote to me in another letter:

I have never had any disposition to happiness, despite the virtues of the body and of the soul that you attribute to me. In reality I have always had a body full of defects, which have made me suffer, so much so that I am amazed at having reached this age, battered but not yet completely decrepit. I'm not talking about virtues of the soul, because I have always been and continue to be dissatisfied with myself. I found happiness in friendship and, above anything else, in my wife's love, not in myself but outside of me.³⁰

Bobbio was similar to Croce in other respects; for example, in the humility and detachment with which he held the many honours he received (I remember his ironic response when he was made senator for life³¹). Another point in common with Croce was the inclination towards 'depressive' moments rather than 'manic' ones: Bobbio recalled Croce's notebooks from the times of Second World War, in which the philosopher noted the black and slothful mood he had had for a few days (and nights);³² this was because: "The only way not to suffer", Croce writes, "would be to become just as stupid as the world has become".³³

Of himself Bobbio said he had a pessimistic character, characterised by distrust in the world, fear of others, perplexity towards life,³⁴ and that Croce's worldview helped him to resist the most radical pessimism propagated by existentialism, the pessimism of the will.³⁵ The situation was similar for Bobbio's intellectual style: a 'supreme problem' of philosophy does not exist; every good

study must be circumscribed, as he recognises in his splendid portrait of Croce in the essay 'Civil Italy'.³⁶ Bobbio had greater appreciation for analytic distinctions than he did for syntheses:

Those who, like me, value current analytic philosophy [...] find comfort in so much of Croce's work, who never tired of preaching, even to the philosopher, the virtue of acumen and discernment, which is the virtue of knowing how to distinguish [...]. And please do not give me the usual litany that there is no analysis without synthesis, nor synthesis without analysis. Croce too knew it and repeated it often. Still, there are philosophers who are convinced that they have made a discovery when they have found a new distinction; there are others, on the contrary, who believe they will go down in history for having succeeded in reducing a distinction to unity. Croce undoubtedly belonged to the first of these two ranks.³⁷

Croce's and Bobbio's sensitivities to the problem of religion were partly similar but also partly different:

To an ethic of restlessness, of insecurity, of anguish when confronted with the elusiveness of the world, Croce's teachings contrasted a morality of virile detachment from possessions when it came to big things, and of courageous resolve when it came to small things (which were the ones that counted) [...]. Croce once spoke of 'painful serenity', comparing life to a 'tragedy in which, through shame and pain, good and truth are laboriously created'. It was an ethic that proposed as an ideal of happiness not the accomplished bliss of heavenly or earthly paradise, but more simply peace of mind, peace with oneself, the satisfaction of having fulfilled one's duty and having overcome all challenges with dignity and humility.³⁸

Bobbio, for his part, recognised himself in the *Contributo alla critica di me stesso* (*Contribution to Criticisms of Myself*) by Croce. At a certain point he found himself outside of traditional religion,³⁹ without any drama and almost without realising it. He multiplied his criticisms of certain aspects of both the Catholic Church and its doctrine.⁴⁰ However, unlike Croce, he found in philosophy no substitute for traditional religion:

The religious sense of life consists for me in stopping in front of mystery. Mystery for me is an ineliminable residue, the limit of our reason. For Croce mystery was a shadow destined to be eliminated little by little. We read: 'mystery, logically understood, is not

impenetrable and insoluble to thought, but rather penetrable and dissoluble by definition, being continuously penetrated and resolved'.⁴¹

Croce and Bobbio, on the other hand, had different attitudes to 'the praise of meekness', as Bobbio once wrote to me:

While being, as you know, an admirer of Croce, the only aspect of his work that I have never been able to accept is the harshness, the tendentiousness, the temperamentality of his criticisms. I have participated in many philosophical and political debates, I have had many opponents, but I have always tried to maintain a calm style, discussing the pros and cons with historical and rational arguments, but not with personal attacks. I praised meekness, which is something Croce would not have liked.⁴²

And once he scolded me:

I don't know the feeling of hatred and I can't quite understand what you feel when you say you hate this and that. Regarding Hitler, Mussolini and similar people, and today regarding Berlusconi and the new fascists, I felt, if anything, indignation, not hatred. I don't throw insults, I try to understand [...] these feelings of yours seem all the stranger to me, as you claim to be a man of faith. One of Jesus' fundamental precepts, indeed the precept that characterised Christian morality is love towards one's enemy. To me faith and reason not only do not seem the same thing, but they appear to me to be one the opposite of the other: I believe because it is absurd.⁴³

4. The Italian liberal tradition in Croce and Bobbio

From the end of the Giolitti era onwards, Italians have demonstrated very little sympathy for liberalism during the entire 'long century', as testified by fascism, social communism and Berlusconism. While it is true that, during the almost sixty years of the so-called 'first Italian republic', it was the liberal institutions which prevailed, this happened simply because the Second World War was won by the Anglo-Saxon liberal powers and because Italy was – in the post-war geopolitical partition, which Italy did not decide on – in the 'western' part. But culture and customs, even in that period, were not – at least for the most part – liberal, neither in popular consciousness nor in that of the 'intellectuals'. Italians were democrats, communists, socialists, catholic-socialists, supporters of the 1968

protest movement, neo-Marxists, neo-fascists, populists, or plainly indifferent, but not liberals.

Benedetto Croce in the first half and Norberto Bobbio in the second of this 'long century' were, by far, the intellectuals who were most purely, coherently, faithfully, passionately and effectively devoted to the study, interpretation and preaching of liberal ideals.

Starting with Croce's death, a certain type of anti-Croce propaganda of various origins (Marxist, Catholic, neo-positivist, neo-fascist) was born and grew stronger.⁴⁴ In this type of propaganda, anything goes, even interpreting Bobbio's chapter on Croce and liberalism in his 1955 book *Politica e cultura* as a disavowal of Croce's liberalism,⁴⁵ while Bobbio, precisely in that text, affirms that:

[Croce was] [t]he moral conscience of Italian anti-fascism [...]. One should read in 'Soliloquio di un vecchio filosofo', which dates from 1942, the trepidation regarding the freedom of the past and the hope of renewal: neither inert pessimism nor excessively candid optimism. Inspired by this dominant idea, he took a position, time and time again, against the contamination that non-philosophers, pedantic professors, pseudo-politicians and politicians made of this idea with empirical and practical concepts. His defence of liberalism, which he continued tirelessly until his very last days, constituted the defence of the ideal of freedom which is identified with moral conscience. And it was conducted above all in three directions: against Marxism, against democracy, against liberalism. [...] I immediately say that, despite the many doubts that I believe I must raise concerning Benedetto Croce's theory of liberalism, I have no intention at all of diminishing the liberal function that his thought and personality had in the years of fascist dominance. There are some who, out of hatred for liberalism or hatred for Croce, would like to disregard the merits and practical value of the anti-fascist position of the author of *Storia d'Europa*. Anyone who participated in the anxieties and hopes of those years, and I mean of course intellectuals, cannot forget that the highroad to convert the uncertain to anti-fascism was to have them read and discuss Croce's books; most young intellectuals reached anti-fascism through Croce, and those who had already arrived at that position, or had always been there, took comfort in knowing that Croce, the highest and most illustrious representative of Italian culture, had not bowed to dictatorship. Any criticism of Croce's attitude during fascism is resentful and malevolent polemic. As such it does not deserve discussion.⁴⁶

Instead, there have been many comments, and for a long time (to this day), by historians, political scientists and philosophers, claiming that Bobbio denied Croce a place in the tradition of liberal thought, so much so that Bobbio many years later wrote: 'I gladly make amends if I have given the impression of ousting Croce from the history of liberal thought'.⁴⁷

In fact, for Bobbio:

the persistence and vitality of the culture that I called liberal (to distinguish it from the Marxist and Catholic ones) during the years of the regime are also to be connected to the teachings of Croce, who never as in those years had risen so high and penetrated so deeply into people's minds [...]. The initiation to Croce was also, at least for the young, non-communist intellectuals who would later join 'Giustizia e Libertà' and liberal socialism movements and would later run the Partito d'Azione, the main road of anti-fascism.⁴⁸

Croce's influence was acting not only on non-communist intellectuals: most of the scholars of the communist Antonio Gramsci have never remarked, at least not in their publications, and perhaps not even privately, that Croce is the most frequent proper name in his *Prison Notebooks*, more so than Marx, Lenin, Engels, Hegel, Sorel, Einaudi etc.⁴⁹

Croce⁵⁰ for many decades and with persuasive force showed the public (first of all the Italian public, and secondly the European and the international one) the theoretical and practical errors of Marxism, communism, racism, nationalism, fascism, decadentism, positivism, and Catholic fundamentalism. Towards the end of his life – when Italy was split in two: the Kingdom, liberated by the Allies, and the Nazi-Fascist Republic of Salò – he also played a direct and central political role; for some months he was the most influential Italian politician, more so than De Gasperi, more than Togliatti, more than Badoglio, more than the Lieutenant of the Kingdom, more than the King.⁵¹

But Croce died in 1952, having been marginalised and rendered supposedly obsolete by a steadily increasing mass of 'surpassers'. At first Croce was fought against, then simply forgotten. Paradoxically, the best studies of Croce of the last twenty years are, in my opinion, those of a non-Italian American: David D. Roberts.⁵²

Nevertheless, Croce did have an heir, at least in the fields of politics and ethics: namely Norberto Bobbio.⁵³ Bobbio has written many books and many articles, often for specialists, but his first influential as well as his most successful book, aimed at a cultured but non-specialist readership, was precisely *Politica e Cultura* in 1955. The very date of the book marks a desire to resume the discourse of the now-dead Neapolitan philosopher. The content, in addition to the two chapters explicitly named after Croce, takes up the themes of liberalism

and the non-subservience of culture to party politics, which were characteristic of Croce. And it takes them up not from the penultimate moment, that is, from the one in which Croce argued above all against fascism, but from the ultimate, that is, from the moment at which Croce argued above all against communism. This book by Bobbio is a splendid rallying cry for liberalism against the Italian communists who then opposed it.

Croce and Bobbio's opposition to illiberal conceptions of all kinds, unmasking them in all their sometimes pseudo-subtle and pseudo-moral forms, and their insensitivity to intellectual fashions, political winds, the 'forces of Destiny' and the 'ineluctable urgencies of History' led them to oppose both communist Marxism and the fascist ideology,⁵⁴ and this in a country like Italy where the typical attitude of many intellectuals throughout the twentieth century was to oscillate between opposing extremisms, remaining in any case illiberal at all times. It thus happened that, for years, both philosophers were attacked by that type of left and that type of right.⁵⁵

We, Bobbio and I, had come into contact – at different moments in history – with theoretical Marxism and with the multiform movement of political socialism; we had both criticised them, but we had both grasped the good aspects of the theory and political practice of Marxism. Croce reproached Einaudi for not seeing that liberalism could very well chime with a socialist type of economic policy, and, when he found himself president of the Italian Liberal Party, after a meeting with the socialist Giuseppe Saragat he wrote:

[Saragat and his friends] want to maintain in socialism its character and its history, which is essentially liberal [...]. An alliance or some form of agreement are possible with the socialists, as we accept many socialist concepts concerning reforms and we are ready to discuss and allow ourselves to be persuaded about others.⁵⁶

Bobbio, a former supporter of the Action Party, had, over the decades, studied and supported liberal-socialist ideals. If we look at the classics of liberal thought, then Croce and Bobbio were akin to Mill, Keynes and Popper⁵⁷ rather than the liberalism of Locke and Tocqueville: that is, they were in favour of state intervention in the economy, with a view to improving the conditions of the most disadvantaged social classes.

The two philosophers' opinions when it came to democracy, on the other hand, were partly different. Croce was very distrustful of it, while Bobbio had much more confidence. But they also had some common views: both saw a theoretical error, fraught with negative practical consequences, in so-called 'egalitarianism'. Croce wrote in *Storia d'Europa*:

liberalism had accomplished its detachment from democratism, which, in its extreme form of Jacobinism, by furiously and blindly

pursuing its abstractions, had not only destroyed some living and physiological tissues of the social body, but, by exchanging the people for a part of the people, the least civilised part, and a demonstration for the disorganised, shouting and impulsive crowd, and exercising tyranny in the name of the People, had passed into the opposite of its assumption, and, in place of equality and freedom, had opened the way equally to servitude and dictatorship.⁵⁸

And Bobbio, in one of his last interviews, said:

Egalitarianism is a philosophical conception that leads to a fantasy world, to the emptying of individuality, as it transpires in classical egalitarian utopians such those of Bacon, Campanella and others. This level and this depersonalisation are then the suitable terrain for the birth of political totalitarianism. [...] It is necessary to distinguish egalitarianism from equality. Egalitarianism is an organicist philosophical conception and it is also an attempt pursued in states where communism has come to power; a conception and an attempt that do not approve of the independence and peculiarities of the individual within society. [...] [T]he search for equality, at least since communism has come to power, has been carried out in a perverse way, as a forced levelling down [...]. Equalisation is instead a tendency and a movement towards the reduction of the economic differences between individuals and social groups.⁵⁹

Liberal Socialism? Social Democracy? These are terms that, paradoxically, displeased both a certain left and a certain right, as Bobbio observed in 1981:

In recent years we have read I don't know how many pages, all increasingly controversial and increasingly documented, on the crisis of this capitalist state in disguise which is the welfare state, on the hypocritical integration into which the labour movement in the great machine of the state and of multinational companies have led. Now we are reading other pages, no less learned and documented, on the crisis of this socialist state, also in disguise, which under the pretext of social justice is destroying individual freedom and reduces the individual to an infant guided from cradle to grave by the hand of a guardian who is no less prompt than he is suffocating. A paradoxical, almost grotesque situation.⁶⁰

This situation certainly appeared grotesque to Bobbio, who at first had not supported that 'lefty' criticism and later did not support that other 'rightist'

criticism. He had seen the same thing happen to Croce as would later happen to himself: first attacked at length and mocked by the fascists, and then, after the fall of fascism, ‘meanly’ or ‘ungenerously’ described by the Marxists as a ‘precursor of fascism’, ‘reactionary’, and ‘pro-fascist’.

Most of the chapters that make up the book, *Politics and Culture* were written by Bobbio between 1951 and 1954. These are the years of McCarthyism and, at the same time, they are also the last years of Stalinism. If this was the atmosphere for the ideals of liberalism within the two victorious superpowers of Second World War – the war waged by them against Hitler in the name of freedom – we can understand the militant urgency felt by Bobbio at the time in arguing with those intellectuals and Italian politicians who attacked liberalism. These assailants of liberalism were the Communists, and specifically the Italian Communists, as they were before the death of Stalin and the denunciations made by Nikita Khrushchev at the XXth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Bobbio, reminiscing in 1993 about the early 1950s and reminding the reader that he, despite his clear and substantial criticism of their ideas, had nevertheless accepted public dialogue with them, wrote:

the policy of dialogue had a strong rationale given the situation of our country, where the strongest communist party in the West had emerged, and that outlawing this party, as had happened in other countries, would have put the country into a state of permanent civil war. [...] Despite everything that has been said recently about the potential civil war that would undermine the foundations of our republic, dialogue was not just a pacifying tactic used by the mediating intellectuals. Most parties officially defined their stance towards the Communist Party with the word ‘confrontation’. Dialogue and confrontation have characterised the history of our republic. But neither dialogue nor confrontation were ever inspired by the idea of operating a philosophical synthesis between the two ‘isms’, liberalism and communism, which are philosophically incompatible. They were, much more simply, two political strategies for a practical compromise.⁶¹

On the other hand, while there has been only one kind of fascism and one kind of Nazism, of communism there have been two: the tyrannical and genocidal kind that existed in the USSR, China, Cambodia, and the one found in Italy, France, Holland, Spain, England, the USA and Germany. And Bobbio – who certainly never spoke with Stalin, Beria, Mao or Pol Pot – recognised that he had good personal relations with some Italian Communists:

I have engaged in controversy with the Communists, but controversies with people with whom it was possible to have a dialogue. With some communists moreover, such as Napolitano, Aldo Tortorella, Gian Carlo Pajetta and Pietro Ingrao, I also had relationships of mutual respect and real friendship.⁶²

Benedetto Croce had found himself in a similar situation. He never participated in the fascist government, even though he was asked to, but repeatedly sat in governments which involved the Communists after the war. At a meeting of the council of ministers, Croce publicly reminded Togliatti of his esteem and expressed regret for the communist Gramsci, his affection for the communist Giorgio Amendola, and how he had helped – while fascism was in full flow – a Neapolitan communist leader to publish a book by Antonio Labriola.⁶³ On 30th April 1945, Croce wrote:

I had received from Rome expressions of astonishment and objections to the appointment of Bianchi Bandinelli, a communist, as general director of Fine Arts [Bianchi Bandinelli was an intellectual against whom, years later, Bobbio started a polemic], which I supported with minister Arangio Ruiz, who said he shared my favourable judgement. But I replied that even if the Communist Party and other parties exclude capable and suitable men from administrative posts because they are liberals, we must include them, even if they are Communists.⁶⁴

Moreover, communism for Bobbio had pointed out some real and important problems:

communism was an ‘upside-down utopia’, because it was a utopia of liberation that had turned into its opposite, that is, into the constriction and oppression of human beings [...]. Historical communism has failed, there is no arguing with that. But the problems remain, the very same problems that the communist utopia pointed out and believed to be soluble. This is the reason why it is foolish to rejoice in its defeat, rub one’s hands with glee and say: ‘We always said so!’ Oh, you poor deluded soul, do you really believe that the end of historical communism (I insist on the ‘historical’) has put an end to the need and thirst for justice? [...] I affirm, repeating myself, that I have never been a communist, but also that I have never been anti-communist, in the sense in which anti-communism is understood today. And I say that the struggles for greater social equality against such dramatic injustices in the

world – struggles engaged in not only by Communists, but also by them – are sacrosanct.⁶⁵

5. The mission of the erudite and the religion of freedom

‘Croce was an animator, an awakener and an educator.
But he never rested on an achieved solution and never let his listeners rest.
And he gave an (inimitable) example of indefatigable industriousness, supported by a constant
critical spirit’.
Norberto Bobbio, 1966

‘Croce was our master in moral and political life.
We owe it to him if we saved our souls’.
Norberto Bobbio, 1998

Among the many past and present examples, in Italian society, of intellectuals who aspire to political positions or, at least, roles, and of politicians who, in turn, yearn to write books on various aspects of knowledge, Croce and Bobbio stand out for bucking the trend. Those who know Croce (but how many do know him in today’s Italy?) know perfectly well how much he shunned politics, both in terms of holding a political office and of acting as a party ideologue; for those who do not know him I recommend reading the many and lucid examples recorded in his *Taccuini di Guerra*, written between 1943 and 1945, when Croce was in fact the most important politician in Italy, but – although stoically fulfilling his duties – he felt oppressed by this activity, and sought relief in his studies; this was the same sentiment, but heightened, that he had felt previously when he served as minister during the last of Giolitti’s governments. He felt that such experiences should be completed as soon as possible, compatibly with the circumstances and with one’s own sense of duty.

Coming to Bobbio, anyone of a certain age and who has personally observed him as a public figure, knows that he, who had begun his militant writings with *Politica e Cultura*, a book entirely dedicated to the critique of the confusions between politics and culture, during all the previous and all the subsequent decades had refused both to give ‘cultural’ support to the various political tendencies that developed (whether they were fascist, communist, linked to the 1968 protest movement, to Craxi or to Berlusconi) and he had also rejected all the political posts proposed to him, most notably the Presidency of the Republic.

Such behaviour was the exact opposite of that of many other ‘intellectuals’, who embraced the role of ‘organic intellectuals’ and accepted very willingly, or even sought, any political position, not infrequently switching their (fleeting) loyalties to any one of the tendencies listed above; and they did this in a temporal

succession which is not at all accidental, but always consistent with the ‘wind of power’ of the day (at least in this respect they were very consistent).

Personal weaknesses? Certainly! But also, at least in part, a result of theoretical confusions, those found in Marxism, Leninism and, for example, Gentile’s fascism, which explicitly dictated that ‘now philosophers must not limit themselves to interpreting the world: they must change it’.

For Bobbio, on the contrary, the true theory on the subject is that of Croce:

there was a constant idea in Croce’s thoughts and concerns: men of culture (and in particular philosophers) have a responsibility and a political function, as men of culture (or as philosophers) [...] they cannot escape the specific political responsibilities that derive precisely from their being men of culture, and from the awareness that culture has a function of criticism, control, vivification and creation of values, which is, in the short or long term, a political function, and it is necessary and effective above all in times of crisis and renewal [...]. [T]he problem of the politics of culture was the one he felt most deeply, with all the conscience of someone who was firstly a learned man and only secondly a practical man or a politician, but who at the same time had a very acute sense of civic responsibility, felt by any scholar who is not arid, and of the enlightening function of philosophy, when it is not academicism or verbalism or virtuosity of abstract ideas.⁶⁶

The man of culture deeply feels the problem of the common good and serves it as a soldier, doing his job as best he can. Bobbio recalls that Croce during Fascism:

has not resigned himself to leaving the political scene, even if there would be a way to avoid suffering: ‘to become stupid, together with the world that has become stupid’. He complains about the difficulties imposed by censorship but he comments, ‘we live in noble times, in an environment of heroism’. On November 28th 1938 (when between nine and ten at night, anti-Jewish fury broke out in Germany, the ‘Night of Broken Glass’) he wrote: ‘I fight with the sadness that oppresses me, yet I desperately insist on my studies’.⁶⁷

This idea was passed on to some people, for example to Piero Gobetti, whom Bobbio ascribes to that generation influenced by Croce that, ‘overwhelmed by the crisis of the liberal state, found in Croce the teacher of freedom’.

In one of his last writings, after having defined Croce as ‘the most perfect European specimen of our culture’, someone who attempts to redeem the future of civilisation from the present of barbarism, he [Gobetti] concludes: ‘the man of books and of science will therefore try to keep at bay the darkness of the new Middle Ages while continuing to work as if it were in a civilised world’. In that ‘as if’ we find the sense of the now inevitable catastrophe and, at the same time, the conviction that the philosopher’s task is to keep the lamp lit in the thickening darkness. As Gobetti understood once again with infallible precision, this was Croce’s lesson for the generation that was educated in the 1930s and 1940s [...] reading the stories of Italy and Europe, accepting as a theory, as a rule of action and as a prediction, the idea that history is the history of freedom.⁶⁸

The persecution during the twenty years of fascist rule, especially in the 1930s, the years of the alliance with Hitler and of the terrible ‘religious war’ of Nazi-Fascism aimed at conquering the souls and bodies of citizens, gave Croce a new lease of life after an already long career as an intellectual, and allowed him to give the best of himself (a parallel with Winston Churchill comes to mind, who after an already long political career had yet to live his ‘finest hour’). Bobbio observes:

between 1925 and 1940 a second, richer and more luxuriant season blossomed for the long reign of Benedetto Croce, who was the moral conscience of Italian anti-fascism, not so much as a restorer of idealism (which had already died, giving way to absolute historicism), but as a philosopher of freedom.⁶⁹

It is this ‘Croce the opponent’ (to use the title of one of the last, prophetic articles by Piero Gobetti, taken up by Bobbio in his *Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano*) who writes *Storia d’Italia*, pronounces a speech against the Lateran Treaty, writes *Storia d’Europa* and *History as the Story of Liberty*, and in a thousand writings in the magazine *La Critica* teased the various racist, nationalist, totalitarian, irrationalist cultural insertions that the regime and its willing servants tried to inject into Italian minds. Croce ‘saves the souls’ of those who listen to his proclamation of the Religion of Liberty.⁷⁰

Things, in the history of the world, went as we know, and Bobbio, when many years later he reviewed a book by an author who had written ‘I, as a student, did not side with Croce or Gentile’, felt the need to specify:

I cannot say the same [...] it was precisely through Croce’s teachings, not as a ‘pure philosopher’ but as a historian, a man of letters and a moralist, that I finally began to understand better the connection between philosophical thought and reality, to realise that it was not true that fascism was right because it was defended by Gentile, but,

on the contrary, that Gentile was wrong because he defended fascism [...]. Which of the two philosophers, the defender of the ethical state or the historian of the religion of freedom, has won, I don't think there can be any doubt.⁷¹

Bobbio's decades-long battles against Zhdanov's Marxism, decadent existentialism, the party-dominated political intrigues of the First Republic and Berlusconi's authoritarian populism were certainly not so dramatic. However, it seems appropriate to report what Luca Addante wrote in the obituary he wrote when Bobbio died:

Italian culture loses, with the passing of Norberto Bobbio, its most authoritative voice. Wanting to identify the most important Italian intellectual of the first half of the twentieth century, we could hardly deny this role to Benedetto Croce. By carrying out a similar operation with respect to the second half of the century, the one that has just passed, it would be equally difficult for us to find a personality of a stature comparable to that of the Turin intellectual [...]. In fact, both were first and foremost 'clerics who have not betrayed me', to use the words with which Bobbio himself wanted to unite Croce with other intellectuals on whom he focuses his attention in the beautiful *Italia Civile*. And of a civilised Italy, light years away from the actual, small-minded Italy (fascist and then republican) in which they lived and worked, Croce and Bobbio were apostles, at the same time listened to and betrayed. Listened to, since their influence on Italian culture was enormous; betrayed, because despite their influence, small-minded Italy continued to remain so.⁷²

6. The function of philosophy

'Even today, after a lot of water has gone under the bridges of philosophy, there are few philosophical writings to which I am willing to ascribe the stimulating function of Croce's pages'.

Norberto Bobbio, 1964

Recounting his first encounter with Croce's philosophy, Bobbio summarises it as follows:

Croce's doctrine was first of all about methodology. In historical research, a clear distinction should be made between history and news; at the centre of research there should be the 'historical problem'; no prescriptive or prophetic or even predictive philosophy of history, no moralistic or pragmatic history, history as

a search for the universal in the individual [...]; in literary criticism, rejection of literary genres, art as an autonomous category of the spirit, not to be confused on the one hand with philosophy, on the other with ethics, and intended as a universal concept, too often mixed up with empirical concepts mistaken for pure concepts.⁷³

In 1927 Bobbio was given the *Breviario di estetica* as a present, by Leone Ginzburg, and from his first enthusiastic phase as an ‘integral disciple’ he later continued to read Croce and meditate on him throughout his life, until his last years. He therefore had all the time to form his own specific point of view: Bobbio’s Croce is not that of ‘neo-idealism’ but that of ‘absolute historicism’:

Croce himself, shortly before the outbreak of the [first world] war, having completed, at the end of the construction of his system, the conjunction of philosophy with history, preferred to speak, to indicate his philosophy, of ‘historicism’ or even of ‘absolute historicism’, until, in a 1943 memo, while reflecting on the confusions to which the idealistic conception of philosophy had lent itself, he observed that the time had come for philosophy to dismiss the word ‘idealism’, having been born ambiguous or having become so, and which philosophy has used in ways whose effects have not always been good.⁷⁴

Bobbio produced a synthesis of Croce’s ‘historicism’ which is masterly in its clarity and depth⁷⁵ and, as a good teacher, he indicated a short reference text: ‘if among Croce’s writings I had to indicate the one in which I saw the fruitful part of his philosophical teaching expressed with the greatest conciseness and completeness, I would point to the essay “Filosofia e metodologia”’.⁷⁶

As a young man he had observed that:

for those who wished to devote themselves to philosophical studies, Gentile’s work seemed to permit one to ascend a step higher in the ascent towards philosophical perfection. Only later, expanding the horizon of my studies beyond Italian philosophy and beginning to deal with specific research in the field of the theory of law, it did not take long to be convinced that the philosophy of the pure act was a skilful but specious and sterile verbal game from which a jurist would not have received great illumination when he laboriously comes to discover that, according to current idealism, jurisprudence must be defined as ‘willed will’.⁷⁷

Bobbio recalls the theoretical separation (the political and personal one will come ten years later) between Croce and Gentile in 1913–14:

Croce's article 'Intorno all'idealismo attuale' [...] creates a hitherto latent contrast between the two different ways of conceiving the essence, function and historical significance of philosophy [...]. If in the early years it might have seemed that the elder of the two men had attended philosophy lessons given by the younger, now Croce [...] openly declares his dissatisfaction – which is the natural reaction of those who believe that philosophy should arise from particular studies in different fields of knowledge and not only from itself – with regard to the '*purus philosophus*'.⁷⁸

Ah, how many pure philosophers there were then, how many there are still today! And to both the academic world and to the populace 'they seem to be a step higher in the ascent towards philosophical perfection'. Once I spoke to Bobbio, perplexed by an interview in Brescia with Emanuele Severino, in which he had told me that 'he considered Giovanni Gentile the only true Italian philosopher of the twentieth century'. When Bobbio read an essay on Emanuele Severino that I had published in *Quaderni Piacentini*, in which I had made use of that interview,⁷⁹ among other things, he wrote to me:

Although I have friendly relations with Severino, who is a nice person, I have never managed to take his philosophy seriously, because at the level of abstraction that characterises 'the being cannot not be etc.' I can't find a place for the problems that interest me and that stimulate me to reflect on myself, on the world around me, on the history of which I too am a tiny fragment. The derivation from Gentile through Bontadini is convincing and well developed. Every year I spend a few days in the company of Bontadini, here in Cervinia, where he too, like me, often comes, and a good part of our conversations are dedicated to Severino, his favourite and still deeply loved pupil, despite his apostasy. I found in your beautiful essay many arguments that I always present, in vain, to Bontadini, who also criticises Severino, but always remaining at the same level of abstraction, from which I am unable to make him descend. A beautiful example of a dialogue among the deaf [...]. Among the most apt and pleasant pages of your essay are those in which you write about repetitiveness through variation, and then you examine some stylistic styles with appropriate examples, and you conclude by talking about 'narcissism'.⁸⁰

And then: 'Severino is considered the only Italian philosopher worth talking about [...] in any case the discussion about Severino, about his philosophy, his person, is not particularly interesting to me either'.⁸¹

History has a habit of repeating itself, it would seem, although with respect to Croce's disputes with Gentile many decades earlier there are some differences; the first difference is Bobbio's non-polemical style, and the second lies in the different nature of today's society (complex, fragmented and dispersed) and of its cultural and media subsystems. As a result, no actual philosophical controversy occurred between the 'concrete' Bobbio and the 'abstract' Severino.

Bobbio, in his *Profilo ideologico* and in many other texts, repeated that the main philosophical enemies of Croce were two: positivism and irrationalism. Although Bobbio did not feel very close to the omnipresent severe critic of positivism⁸² of the first decade of the century, and whose anti-intellectualism was a point in common with the irrationalists,⁸³ similarly to Croce he despised the rhetoric of the magazines, *Hermes*, *La Voce*, *Leonardo* and even more so ('incredible out-of-date stale rubbish', 'stench of mould') the magazines *Il selvaggio* and *La vita nova*.⁸⁴ Moreover, Bobbio attacked existentialism as a 'philosophy of decadence' in the 1940s, and clearly wrote that Nietzsche, the master of irrationalism, was also the master of fascism.⁸⁵

In his later years, well aware of the all-Italian 'Heidegger renaissance', Bobbio wrote: 'an existentialist, Heideggerian interpretation of Hobbes has recently come out. We might say: confusing the prince of light with the prince of darkness'.⁸⁶

When I was thinking of writing that book on Croce, Bobbio noted the difficulty in publishing it: even the publishing house Laterza, for whom Croce had been a consultant for forty years, was no longer publishing Croce's works.

because they say that no one buys them anymore. I say this with regret, because I have always been a great admirer of Croce, and still am. He was the only true teacher for a generation who managed to make the 'long journey' through fascism without becoming infected. However, more than the anti-positivist dispute, the anti-irrationalist one would seem to me of greater interest (today it is the philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger that is dominant and rampant).⁸⁷

In fact, at the time I did not see any irrationalistic danger. On the other hand, I took the various structuralisms, neo-positivisms and analytic philosophies much more seriously, and I found in Croce the antidote to their methodological reductionism. Only later, and more and more as time goes by, did I feel the problem of irrationalism, but not the one of Nietzsche or Heidegger;⁸⁸ such an irrationalism was, in my opinion, quite harmless, because it took place only inside an 'enclosed garden', that is inside the academic ivory tower, rendering the discussion unknown to almost everyone. I felt much more strongly the problem of the irrationalism that pervades the common sense of ordinary people, in the form of the various genetic mutations of romanticism: decadentism,

existentialism, the 'Beat generation', the ideology of the 1968 protest movement, the 'New age' phenomenon. Such manifestations of irrationalism certainly did not derive from pristine academics, but rather from mass culture itself, left to itself (and this is a sin – of omission – on the part of academic culture!) and prey to the cynicism of media tycoons, of consumerism, and of the slogans of a new type of politician, racist and populist.⁸⁹

Bobbio felt he had to defend Croce from the absurd accusation of irrationalism:

we saw with surprise a historian of culture like Lukács considering Croce among the representatives and the architects of the destruction of reason, beginning with Nietzsche and ending with Hitler. Now, our generation did not have to wait for Lukács's book to know that there had been a wave of irrationalism in Europe at the beginning of the century, because we had learned it, several years earlier, from Croce, and we have not forgotten his admirable pages on irrationalism, in his *Storia d'Italia*, and on those – no less outstanding and truthful – in *Storia d'Europa*. For those who have only read Lukács' falsifications, it will be good to quote at least the passage in which Croce speaks of the 'geniuses' of Florentine magazines [...].⁹⁰

I note, however, that Croce did not limit himself to scolding Papini and other personalities from Giolitti's times, but, starting from the 1930s,⁹¹ he went back to the roots of all subsequent neo-romanticisms, that is to the historical Romanticism of the nineteenth century. Croce had seen irrationalism nearly win over not only the pens of writers, but also the minds of the masses and the policies of governments: there is a 'theoretical romanticism' – that is, idealism – which continues and advances 'modern philosophy', and there is a 'moral romanticism' which is 'pathology' and 'moral morbidity'.⁹²

For both Croce and Bobbio, the challenge was to create a secular ethics that could overcome the constraints of various traditions – starting with the Catholic one – without falling prey of the subversive, charismatic nature of irrationalism. For Croce and Bobbio, not being a traditionalist does not imply despising traditions: in fact, they often venerated them a great deal, as a result of their love for continuity in the history of ideas, in institutions and in people's memories.

Croce had formulated a proposal for a secular and non-traditionalist ethics in many writings, among which in *Frammenti di etica* and in several celebrated chapters of his *Storia d'Europa*. Decades later Bobbio expressed a similar attitude, declaring himself to be a 'non-believer' in relation to religion, 'progressive' in politics and 'neo-positivist', while opposing in the private sphere the 'sexual revolution'⁹³ and abortion⁹⁴ and, in the public sphere, extremist

Maoism and the utopias promulgated by the 1968 protesters.⁹⁵ The ethics of the ‘religion of freedom’ of both scholars are pluralistic, open to reform, anti-authoritarian, rationalist. Such ethics is no less resolute, uncompromising and courageous than the traditional, Catholic one, at least for those who adopt it personally and intimately. And although Bobbio’s ethics, unlike the Catholic one, was certainly not dogmatic, it equally certainly was not ‘relativistic’ (and in this respect was similar to Catholic ethics)!⁹⁶

7. The marginalisation of Croce and Italian culture after the Second World War

‘None of my students from the 1940s to the 1980s has devoted himself or herself to Croce’.
Norberto Bobbio, 1998

In 1939 Croce wrote what Gennaro Sasso called ‘without doubt the most demanding and most painful meditation’ present in his diaries, the purest ‘fragment of ethics’, one of the most agitated, troubled and dramatic fragments that he had ever written:

and I do not care to speak about the sorrow or, even worse than sorrow, about the bitterness and contempt that have swollen my breast towards the many people who have betrayed me and have turned against me, or have moved away from me, or who, every day, without knowing either me or my books, hurl insults at me. What really oppresses me is the general condition of the souls in Italy and outside of Italy; the falsehoods, the wickedness and the stupidity in which we are immersed and almost submerged; the atrocious crimes to which we are the impotent bystanders [...]. How different my old age is from the one I had imagined and longed for, now that I have reached it! I was dreaming of putting an end, or almost, to my personal scientific and literary works, and of living among young people, working with them, directing them, sharing the fruits of my experiences with them, and, we could say, teaching them the secrets of the trade... instead, I had to shore up with my shoulders a crumbling edifice, which is something that could give me some reason for satisfaction or pride, if I were not overwhelmed by the sad thought that, when I am no longer here, no one will take my place, and the ruin of Italian culture will be complete.⁹⁷

And when Croce died in 1952, Bobbio wrote with some pessimism in his obituary:

There is no greater praise, and none is more deserved, than saying that Croce's work can be pointed out to future generations as a symbol of Italy in the first half of the century, that is to say, of civilised Italy. Alongside civilised Italy there was, and there still is, a barbaric Italy. But precisely for this reason Croce's teachings must not be forgotten.⁹⁸

And what happened to Italian culture after his death? Croce's teachings were forgotten! Did this forgetfulness help to give rise to a 'barbaric Italy'? Or, in other words and in a more limited context, did the 'complete ruin of Italian culture' feared by Croce actually happen? In 1966 Bobbio tried to answer, without optimism or pessimism. Just as Giolitti had managed to tame both Catholics and socialists, Croce had done so both with traditional metaphysics and with positivism; but the moment of synthesis did not last long and when the First World War broke out both fascism and irrationalism grew in strength; when the fascist regime ended, it became clear that Marxism was more alive than ever, positivism had become neo-positivism, and irrationalism had been philosophically sanctioned by existentialism:

if we compare the age of idealism, that is the first 15 years of the 20th century, with our age, that is the first 15 years of the second half of the same century, a difference is obvious: the former was more creative, the latter more positive [...]. Theirs was an age of philosophical awakening; ours, of scientific awakening. For this reason, that panorama is as varied as ours is monotonous. But they were falling without realising it towards one of the most tragic periods in European history; we have it behind us.⁹⁹

In 1981, Bobbio seemed to express cautious optimism about Italian philosophical culture:

Viano rightly insisted on the openness and favourable disposition of Italian philosophy towards foreign philosophies, considering this attitude a distinctive feature of our philosophy after the crisis of idealism and a sign of the effort to abolish the 'cultural closure' caused by Croce's hegemony [...] one cannot fail to recognise that a rapidly growing process of de-provincialisation has taken place [...]. Especially in the generations younger than mine, a more mature awareness has formed, namely the awareness of the different levels on which the philosophical debate moved on the world stage.¹⁰⁰

But Bobbio – who in this case played the diplomatic role of summarising the contributions at a conference of university professors such as Verra, Viano,

Vattimo, Paolo Rossi and others, and who therefore was led to reflect the optimism of the speakers with respect to ‘the favourable disposition towards foreign philosophies’, as well as their forgetfulness of Croce. Even if on that occasion he expressed this evaluation, it was not his only one. In 1989, he wrote to me: ‘I am sending you an excerpt from my speech for the centenary of the publishing house Laterza, where concerning the provincialism of Croce I support the opposite thesis to the one I had argued for in the conclusion of the Capri conference’.¹⁰¹

Anyway, as we have already seen in various texts already cited in this essay, Bobbio had boundless admiration for Croce, and when he happened to comment on specific intellectuals, the alleged ‘de-provincialisation’ of Italian culture crumbled before his eyes. On one occasion, after recounting the beneficial effects exercised by Croce’s teaching on various generations of Italian intellectuals, the last of which, perhaps, was his own, he wrote:

But today? It happened to me recently to present a piece of work by a historian of a much younger generation [...] in the introduction the author writes that he took inspiration from four great thinkers: Marx, Tocqueville, Weber and Schumpeter. I said in commenting on this statement that if I had to indicate my authors, I could not help but quote Croce [...]. It has often happened to me to compare my generation to that of our children, who had no masters. Did they not have them, or did they not want them? They burned them (in effigy) and vilified them (not only in effigy). But were they real masters? I doubt it: they last two or three years, and then they are forgotten. [...] I only know from my experience that relying on a compass allows us to navigate the great sea of history with greater safety and saves us from the temptation of turning back each time.¹⁰²

Already at the Capri conference, despite the ‘diplomatic’ line to be taken, Bobbio observed that Italian philosophy is difficult to follow, precisely because of its ‘openness’ to foreign philosophies, which makes it necessary to keep up to date on all fronts (Anglo-Saxon, French, German). And, there is also another cause:

in addition to the vastness of the area, one should also take into account the speed with which the various ‘isms’ are born and die. There is an ever-increasing number of them, and they last shorter and shorter periods of time. It becomes more and more difficult to chase them all and very often, when you have managed to catch one, in your hand you hold a corpse.¹⁰³

And he effectively listed in detail: sociological functionalism, Althusser, the Frankfurt School, Rawls and neo-contractualism, Niklas Luhmann. In his *Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano*, Bobbio underlined, in addition to rapid changes, also a certain exchange of roles:

during the last few years we have witnessed again an exchange of fathers between the extreme right and the extreme left: there is a new right that refers to Gramsci and to his theory of hegemony, and there is a new left that rediscovers Nietzsche, Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. It is no coincidence that there is a convergence between the two radicalisms [...] a common intolerance for the 'mediocrity' of democracy, for the inconclusiveness of parliamentary debates, for the non-heroic virtues of a good citizen and for the unexciting actions of good governments.¹⁰⁴

One could said: these are the usual mechanisms of social fashions, and specifically of the academic subsystem; since the majority of people are not capable of original thought, they lack the necessary courage for an authentic non-conformism, and are attracted to that kind of narcissism that considers automatically superior anything that is widely admired. One could continue by saying that, in such a frame of mind, the easier way to be convinced that one has advanced in the knowledge of the world and in self-development is to join the temporary bundle of novelty that is in fashion.

Such an analysis is correct, although there remains the problem of explaining using historical analysis the specific reasons why such mechanisms are, in a particular historical moment, favoured or hindered, why they prevail or die out, etc.

I have become convinced that the academic subsystem of society – setting aside the specifically Italian pathologies on account of which no Italian university is listed among the top 150 in the world, although the Italian cultural tradition is certainly not, I dare say, to be rated lower than the 150th in the world! – is that it cannot, and must not, be self-referential (on pain of suffering from the mechanisms depicted above), but it must be open to wider society and at the service of society, rather than making use of society for its own goals.

Croce was not a university professor, and indeed he did not even graduate; Bobbio, on the other hand, was a professor, but already as boy he had learned some important lessons from the gathering around Augusto Monti that he attended at the Rattazzi café in Turin. These meetings were fundamental experiences in his life, and, more than just a meeting of friends, had a philosophical and even conspiratorial character:

[the lesson] consisted, at least for me, in making me feel first-hand the gap between academic culture, which is forged at school, and

militant culture, which is formed among classmates and teachers who have come down from their desks, around living problems whose solution requires also personal commitment, and in taking precautions, all of us, against the disease of haughtiness.¹⁰⁵

8. The attempts to deny Bobbio's admiration for Croce and contemporary Italy

‘Croce was, personally, an example of intellectual freedom, of wisdom, of dignity, of industriousness and of rigour in his studies; he united in himself all the qualities of the educator, which other educators or teachers only partially possessed’.

Norberto Bobbio, 1964

In 1989 Bobbio explained which part of Croce's work he preferred:

Croce was a great moralist, as well as a great historian and the great man of letters and a philosopher, as everybody knows (although they don't always acknowledge it). This was, above all else, ‘my’ Croce. And if it took my whole life to convince myself of it, better late than never. [...] When I said he was a moralist I intended this word in its strong meaning, he was one of those people who possess the inner conviction that, ultimately, it is moral forces that guide history; and Croce drew the conclusion that it is the highest office of every man, no matter whether learned or not, to do his share to make them prevail.¹⁰⁶

Bobbio then quoted a passage from Croce on how to strengthen one's love of freedom:

and, without expecting or waiting for absurdities, that is, that politicians change their nature, [it is necessary to] oppose to it a non-political force, which can never be radically suppressed, because it is continuously born again inside one's breast, and with which good governance must always reckon.¹⁰⁷

This is where the octogenarian Bobbio feels in perfect harmony with his teacher Croce: in this radical anti-Machiavellianism, for which politics cannot be independent of morality nor, even more so, distance itself from it. How far we are not only from the ‘everything is political’ slogan of the 1968 protest movement, but from the whole, unchanging, pro-Machiavellian tradition of Italian intellectuals, which, looking back, ascends from Togliatti to Gramsci and Marx and Hegel for what concerns the political left, and from Malaparte and Malapartism to Preziosi, Evola, the other fascist intellectuals, the Florentine magazines, and to D'Annunzio, for the right.

Instead, Croce and Bobbio were scholars of Hegel and Marx and were also admirers of theirs (Croce of Hegel, Bobbio of Marx), but they were not admirers of their Machiavellianism. Concerning the relationship between ethics and politics they embodied a rather different tradition, an anti-Machiavellian one which I would call Plutarchian, and which includes both right-wingers, such as Croce, De Sanctis and Manzoni, as well as left-wingers, such as Bobbio, Salvemini and Mazzini.¹⁰⁸

Bobbio and Croce were directly connected by one primary point, namely, by their common views on moral forces in history, on the religion of freedom as well as in other areas. Furthermore, their close connection is underlined by one basic fact, namely, that Bobbio, especially in his later years, explicitly recognised the supremacy of Benedetto Croce over all his various teachers, and admitted that Croce was the most influential of them all. This fact is not recognised today by almost anyone. Not by the right, which is hostile to Bobbio now that he is dead and it was hostile to him when he was alive, and which certainly does not want to connect him to Croce, because Croce is to be considered, at least potentially (as long as you don't talk about it and don't really analyse him!), a 'proper' author, a moderate liberal like De Gasperi etc.¹⁰⁹ But the deep connection of Bobbio to Croce is not acknowledged by the left either, for reasons that mirror those just mentioned. To begin with, Croce is still, out of inert and ingrained habit, considered a right-wing author, a bit like Clint Eastwood is considered a right-wing director, when in reality the messages of the two are now much more radical and progressive than those of the so-called Italian left. But there are also deeper philosophical reasons: concepts such as historicism, Plutarchism, anti-egalitarianism and the religion of freedom are foreign to the intellectuals forged by the 1968 protest movement, who are neo-positivists, pro-Machiavellian, egalitarian and non-religious.

In fact, in the two most important anthologies of Bobbio's writings, namely those edited by Revelli¹¹⁰ and by Bovero,¹¹¹ texts on Croce find very little space. Another glaring omission is found in the book edited by Revelli and others entitled *Bobbio e il suo mondo*.¹¹² This book, rich in photographic documentation, traces in detail all the phases of Bobbio's personal and intellectual life, but it makes no reference to Croce, not even a single word nor a small photograph (despite the fact that, every year and for decades, Croce used to regularly come to Piedmont and Turin from Naples!) Such a '*damnatio memoriae*' is, I believe, in part unconscious, a sort of Freudian slip of memory, even if in this case it concerns culture and ideology rather than psycho-sexuality.

So, according to these memories, or rather non-memories, Croce was not part of 'Bobbio and his world'. Nevertheless, Bobbio's son Andrea, on the day of his father's civil funeral in Rivalta Bormida, read out the words his father had written in 1995, when the Municipality of Rivalta gave him honorary citizenship; and in them the only philosopher mentioned is precisely Croce:

I've never taken myself too seriously. We must look at ourselves with detachment and irony. Benedetto Croce, a master of our generation, used to say, very wisely, that one must have love for things, not for oneself, and that the more one loves things, the more one is able to become detached from oneself.¹¹³

Explicit acknowledgments of the relationship between Bobbio and Croce appear to be very thin on the ground. I do not want to conform with this omission and, as I also did in my writings from 1983 and 2004, I wanted to present both the intellectual relations of Bobbio with Croce, and also underline the similar role that the two scholars played in the political and cultural life of their times, that of 'Watchmen for Israel'.

Having said that, however, I also want to stress a difference, a quantitative one, in the greatness of the two men. Bobbio would never have placed himself at the same level as Croce, and in fact he never did. On the contrary: '[Croce's] vision of the history of this century is one of the most complex and profound. By comparison, Husserl's seems less new to me, Jaspers' more ambiguous, Heidegger's more inhumane'.¹¹⁴ And also: 'Gone are the great men, those who represented with their genius a whole age; although one looks at Croce's wisdom with regret, at the immoderate vitality of D'Annunzio with distrust'.¹¹⁵ And again: 'to a good knowledge of Croce's work, future scholars should add an attitude of free criticism, avoiding being intimidated by a greatness that has no comparisons in the Italian culture of this century, and avoiding controversy out of prejudice'.¹¹⁶

In this 'greatness that has no comparison', Bobbio agrees with Gramsci on Croce's 'cultural hegemony'. This hegemony is testified to, for example, by the letters exchanged by Croce with Eduard Bernstein, Georges Sorel, Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein and R. G. Collingwood, and by being identified by Roosevelt and Churchill as the main interlocutor of Italian anti-fascism. A hegemony that, in his time, Bobbio certainly did not have.

Anyway, with his capabilities (and they were not small indeed!), Bobbio was also a guardian of freedom in Italy. In 1968 he wrote the 'Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano' for the *Storia della letteratura italiana* published by Garzanti, and in 1970 he was asked by the publishing house Einaudi to publish this essay as a book in its own right, together with everything that, for reasons of length, he could not publish in the *Storia*. On this occasion Bobbio also thought of adding a chapter that would narrate the history of Italian intellectuals up to 1968 and which would be entitled 'La libertà inutile'. But Einaudi did not publish the volume until 1986 (Bobbio mentioned that one of the reasons for that enormous delay was this additional chapter!). In fact, in 1969 Bobbio had explained in 'Resistenza', the magazine of the former Italian partisans of 'Giustizia e libertà', the reasons why he wanted to write that chapter (if we remember the ultra-marxist sympathies of the publisher Einaudi in those years, such a boycott does not seem surprising after all):

today we know that freedom can be used for good and for evil. It can be used not to educate but to corrupt, not to increase one's wealth but to squander it, not to make people wiser and nobler, but to make them more ignorant and vulgar. Freedom can also be wasted. It can be wasted to the point of making it appear useless, unnecessary, even harmful. And by dint of wasting it, one day (near? distant?) we will lose it. They will take it away from us. We still don't know who: whether those we have let thrive on the right or those who are growing impetuously on the left. However, we have the suspicion, fuelled by an uninterrupted, harsh lesson lasting half a century, that the difference will not be very great.¹¹⁷

Many years later Bobbio commented on the passage above in an afterword to a new edition of his *Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano*:

My prediction did not come true. I have made amends for this mistake several times. But what happened was that, after trying to hold back right-wing extremism, we had suddenly and belatedly discovered left-wing extremism.

But he concluded the afterword with these words:

I would no longer say [as I wrote in 1969] that freedom has been useless. One can be free by conviction or by habituation. I don't know how many Italians are genuine, convinced lovers of freedom. Maybe such are few. But there are many who, having breathed it for many years, can no longer live without it, even if they are not aware of it. [...] Italians, for reasons that most of them ignore and do not care about, find themselves living in a society in which they are 'forced' by things greater than themselves to 'be free'. I hope I'm not wrong a second time.¹¹⁸

Those 'things greater than themselves' in 1986 were yet to come: the fall of the Berlin wall, the Italian political corruption scandal Tangentopoli and the subsequent end of the parties of the so-called Italian First Republic, The Capaci bombing by the mafia, the rapid rise of the Northern League and Forza Italia political parties, the influxes of immigration in Italy, the attack on the Twin Towers, the war in Iraq, the eight years of George Bush Junior's government in the USA. But they would come soon. And Bobbio happened to live long enough to see them all, or almost all. And he was combative enough to conclude his direct political statement by denouncing the acute risk of a loss of freedom in Italy and of giving way to new forms of authoritarianism.

Was Bobbio wrong a second time in 1986, after the first time in 1968? Those who are sincere liberals and live with anguish and trepidation the terrible events that, at the time of writing, are taking place in Italian institutions, politics and society, are strongly tempted, much to their regret, to answer 'yes'.

The core of Bobbio's interpretation of Croce is, in his opinion and mine, faith in the religion of freedom, in that non-political, moral force with which politics 'must always reckon'. This faith ensures that, if we do not forget Croce, the master, then Bobbio's contributions, including his final ones, will not sound too pessimistic.

To be more explicit and perhaps clearer: if within the various cultural components that inspired Bobbio's intellectual personality, and within his abundant and multifaceted work, the influence of Croce is highlighted (and not minimised, omitted, or even hidden), then the last lines of Bobbio's afterword can be read in a different way, a way which does not contradict the first but supplements it. Which way is that? To the reader of Croce, and to his critical and empathic spirit, the answer!

* * *

Notes

¹ My contacts with Bobbio began in 1982, when Franco Sbarberi, my supervisor for my M.A. thesis on Gobetti, put me in contact with Bobbio, who was then the president of the Centro Studi Piero Gobetti. I was in contact with him until 2002; that year, his wife Valeria died and from then on Bobbio was assisted in his home by a caregiver. He became more and more depressed, reduced the circle of his interpersonal contacts and did not want me to visit him again. After that, I called him one last time and he wrote to me one last, short letter. Bobbio died in January 2004.

² Many years ago I wrote: 'I present the hypothesis that the authors who, even in this decade, have dealt on various occasions with Croce, today are, almost always, over fifty years old. People in their forties, thirties, and twenties have never known Croce's system, and therefore have not meditated on it, either to make use of it or to reject it. They may, if anything and certainly not frequently, have read a little something out of scholastic or professional obligation, but they could not or did not want to meet the philosopher's spirit. And therefore, they did not deal with his thought even in particular problems' ('Rassegna critica degli studi crociani negli Anni Ottanta con annessa bibliografia' in *Studi Critici* 1-2, October 1992, p. 189).

³ It was he who had chosen me in the competition for admission to the Scuola Normale, but my affection for him was soon exhausted. When, years later, I told Bobbio how much Garin's philologism had disappointed my youthful desire for philosophy, he wrote to me: 'I have the impression that you are too severe [...] Croce has remained a constant point of reference for him too, as it has been for our entire generation' (letter to the author, Turin 25/11/1989). After so many years, however, I have not changed my mind: I am grateful to Garin for having transmitted to me the ideal of completeness and precision in historical

research, but I never liked his disinterest in philosophical ideas; in whose absence, according to Croce, it was not even possible to make history but only bare and dull chronicles.

⁴ Which I later published: 'B. Croce e la controversia sullo psicologismo', *Pedagogia e vita*, serie 48, Oct. -Nov. 1986, pp. 55-72); 'B. Croce discusso dai Neoscolastici' (*Studium*, 3/1987, pp. 397-409); 'La filosofia della storia e B. Croce', *Studium*, 1/1989, pp. 57-67)

⁵ Then published as a book: *Laicità e religione in Piero Gobetti* (with an introduction by Norberto Bobbio, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1986).

⁶ I then had as chairman for the discussion, Giorgio Candeloro.

⁷ 'I personally appreciate historians, people who know their profession, unlike philosophers, who often show they do not know or do not have one' (Bobbio, 'Benedetto Croce' (1962), *Italia civile. Ritratti e testimonianze*, Firenze: Passigli Editori, 1986, p. 73)

⁸ See, by Bobbio: 'Una rara amicizia', preface to Tranfaglia-Venturi-Guidetti Serra et al. *Ada Prospero Marchesini Gobetti*, in *Mezzosecolo* n. 7, Annali 1987-1989, Milano: Franco Angeli, 1990, pp. 3-8; and, also by Bobbio, 'Crocianesimo a Torino', in Norberto Bobbio, *Trent'anni di storia della cultura a Torino: 1920-1950*, Torino: Cassa di Risparmio, 1977, pp. 34-39. Bobbio thought that, among all his many writings, 'the only ones I would like to have survived' were *Italia Civile* (1964) and *Maestri e Compagni* (1984), books containing collections of contributions that Bobbio made to the memory and work of intellectuals he had known (For a bibliography: *De senectute e altri scritti autobiografici*, Einaudi, Turin, 1996, p. 91.

⁹ My teacher, Sofia Vanni Rovighi, had said: 'I have a very high esteem for Garin as a historian of philosophy, even if I don't agree with his views [...] another philosopher who has all my admiration is Norberto Bobbio, who is not a historian of philosophy, but a philosopher. Norberto Bobbio is, in my humble opinion, a man of great genius, of serious preparation, and with whom [...] we have certain things on which we get along. He doesn't know, because I know him but he doesn't know me, or something like that' (Jan Władysław Woś, 'Un colloquio con Sofia Vanni Rovighi', in Marco Paolinelli (ed.), *Ricordo di Sofia Vanni Rovighi nel centenario della nascita*, Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2009, pp. 52-53.)

¹⁰ 'Un maestro di questo secolo', in: Paolo Battistuzzi (ed.), *Benedetto Croce: una verifica*, Roma: L'Opinione Editore, 1978, pp. 31-32

¹¹ 'Fra Croce e Gobetti', in: Norberto Bobbio, *Franco Antonicelli: ricordi e testimonianze*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1992, pp. 73-79

¹² Croce maestro di vita morale, in Paolo Bonetti (ed.), *Per conoscere Croce*, Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche Italiane, 1998, p. 35

¹³ *Italia civile*, op. cit., p. 70.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ These are the titles of three books from 1984, 1964, 1986, which collect writings dating back much earlier.

¹⁶ *Maestri e compagni*, Florence: Passigli Editori, 1984, pp. 169-170.

¹⁷ 'Benedetto Croce', in *Occidente. Rassegna bimestrale di studi politici*, 8 (nn. 3-4, May-August 1952), p. 289-290.

¹⁸ *Autobiografia intellettuale*, op. cit., p. 140.

¹⁹ 'Un invito a Croce', in *Rivista di filosofia* 52, (n. 3, July 1961), p. 354-360

²⁰ Carlo Violi, *Norberto Bobbio: 50 anni di studi. Bibliografia degli scritti 1934-1983*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 1984. The quoted words by Bobbio are found in the preface he wrote for this book, and are then reprinted in *Autobiografia intellettuale*, op. cit., pp. 81-93.

²¹ I used this expression in describing Bobbio's work, that can be called long-lasting in 'watching over' and 'presiding over' problems, debates, tragedies, cultural and political trends

present in the Italian life of his time (cf. Franco Manni, 'I presupposti filosofici nell'opera di Norberto Bobbio', *Studium*, 3/1989, (pp. 315-339), p. 316.

²²Famous expression used by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*.

²³*Italia civile*, op. cit., pp. 69-93.

²⁴'Una rara amicizia', op. cit.

²⁵Ibidem.

²⁶Ibidem.

²⁷Ibidem.

²⁸*Maestri e compagni*, op. cit., pp. 174-178.

²⁹Turin, 31/1/1998

³⁰Turin, 15/9/2000

³¹'[A]s for the laticlave [senator's badge], as they used pompously to say, it does not suit me, and I will wear (and bear) it very badly': letter to the author, Cervinia 17 August 1984.

³²Croce, *Taccuini di guerra*, Milano: Adelphi, 2004, pp. 33, 49, 99, 165. Once Bobbio wrote to me (Turin, 25/11/1989): 'I have very low morale. I think of the beautiful pages of Croce, 'Solitudine di un vecchio filosofo' [I think he meant 'Soliloquio di un vecchio filosofo', in B. Croce, *Discorsi di varia filosofia*, vol. II]. But what is solitude today?'

³³Ref. [12], p. 37.

³⁴*Maestri e compagni*, op. cit., pp. 176, 294.

³⁵*Italia civile*, op. cit., p. 78.

³⁶I would have liked to write an overall study on Croce and was not attracted by his advice to write a specific study on the relationship between Augusto Del Noce and Croce: he wrote (Turin, 6/1/1997): 'Here I am perhaps more Crocean than you. Croce always invited young scholars to tackle well-defined problems'.

³⁷*Italia civile*, op. cit., p. 86. I have tried to illustrate with a concrete example the *distingue frequenter* ('always distinguish') attitude in Bobbio's writing style, in my 'I presupposti filosofici nell'opera di Norberto Bobbio', *Studium*, 3/1989 (pp. 315-339), p. 317 and note 22 on p. 336.

³⁸*Italia civile*, op. cit., pp. 74, 76.

³⁹In a letter to the author (Breuil-Cervinia, 11/08/1991): 'I do not draw any comfort from religion. On the contrary, I seem to demean it by considering it a sort of care package'

⁴⁰See the related quotations from his texts in the sections 'Religione ed etica laica e Secolarizzazione' in my 'I presupposti filosofici', op. cit., pp. 328-333.

⁴¹'Croce maestro di vita morale', op. cit., p. 43.

⁴²Letter to the author (Turin, 6/1/1997). I, on the other hand, liked Croce's style, and had written an essay on Croce's dispute with positivist psychologists Filippo Masci and Giuseppe Di Sarlo ('Benedetto Croce e la controversia sullo psicologismo', op. cit.).

⁴³Letter to the author (Turin, 15/9/2000)

⁴⁴Indeed, such slanderous propaganda had begun even earlier. Read the story narrated by Croce himself of the public slanders (along with the public and almost compulsory retractions) by Palmiro Togliatti, who accused him of being a 'collaborator' with the fascist regime in *Taccuini di Guerra*, op. cit., pp. 162-163, 258, 402-404. Concerning this episode and a certain Aldo Romano, see what Eugenio Di Rienzo writes in his 'Un dopoguerra storiografico...Due, tre cose che so di lui', in *Nuova storia contemporanea*, 4/2006, and now online on *Giornaledifilosofia.net*; see also the various studies by Giovanni Sedita.

⁴⁵ On the defence of the authenticity and originality of Croce's liberal theory, and also in response to Bobbio's criticisms, see Corrado Ocone, *Benedetto Croce. Il liberalismo come concezione della vita*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 2005, pp. 163-165.

⁴⁶ Norberto Bobbio, *Politica e cultura* (new edition edited by Franco Sbarberi), Turin: Einaudi, 2005, pp. 186, 192, 200, 202.

⁴⁷ 'Croce maestro di vita morale', op. cit., p. 40.

⁴⁸ Bobbio, 'Crocianesimo a Torin', op. cit.

⁴⁹ Croce 590 times, Marx 280 (even if, under the expression 'founder of the philosophy of praxis', many more), Lenin 32, Hegel 160, Engels 105, Sorel 125, Einaudi 61. On the influence of Croce's liberalism on Gramsci's political philosophy, I refer to my contribution 'Gramsci e il liberalismo', in Franco Sbarberi (ed.), *Teoria politica e società industriale*, Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988, pp. 128-148.

⁵⁰ From this point until the end of the paragraph I quote with small changes some passages from my introduction to the new edition of Bobbio's book *Liberalismo e democrazia*, Milan: Simonelli Editore, 2004.

⁵¹ This story has always been known to few, and by now very few. It is true that his *War Notebooks 1943-1945* (*Taccuini di Guerra*, op. cit.) have been published relatively recently, and they show in great detail the following, amazing thing: that a scholar, unwillingly and only out of civic duty, found himself – with concrete results – at the centre of the political scene of a not-insignificant state, and – which is even more amazing especially in Italy – with absolute modesty and selflessness. However, these notebooks, at least until now, have practically been ignored by our cultural debate and have not entered into the shared 'canon' of our collective memory, neither for people of average culture nor for intellectuals.

⁵² On Croce, by David D. Roberts: *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987; and also, *Nothing But History: Reconstruction and Extremity After Metaphysics*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.

⁵³ Bobbio, from Turin (1909-2004), had a long teaching career centred around university students, initially as a teacher of philosophy of law and then of the philosophy of politics. And he had an even longer indirect teaching role as a writer of books, essays for magazines, articles and interviews for newspapers. His works have been translated into 19 languages. A small group of admirers and friends, gravitating around the Centro Studi Piero Gobetti in Turin, created a unique initiative: using modern and sophisticated criteria, it has catalogued the approximately 1500 writings of Bobbio (5000 counting the various editions and translations) deposited at the Centre and has put this catalogue on the internet, making the majority of texts easily and freely available in digital format to a truly open community of scholars around the world.

⁵⁴ Just as Karl Popper also wrote the epigraph to his book written during the Second World War (*The Poverty of Historicism*): 'In memory of the countless men, women and children of all beliefs, nations and races that fell victim to the fascist and communist faith in the Inexorable Laws of Historic Destiny'.

⁵⁵ A writing by Bobbio that summarises with great clarity the theoretical terms of the relationship of his liberalism with fascism on the one hand and communism on the other is 'Augusto del Noce: fascismo, liberalismo, comunismo' (*Il Ponte* anno XLIX, n° 6, giugno 1993, now re-printed in the volume *Cinquant'anni non bastano. Scritti di Norberto Bobbio* in the journal *Il Ponte* 1946-1997, Fondazione Monte dei Paschi di Siena, - Florence: Il Ponte Editore, 2005, pp. 233-244.).

⁵⁶ B. Croce, *Taccuini*, op. cit., p. 350

⁵⁷ ‘I believe that a competitive economy is more efficient than a planned economy, but I never believed that this was a decisive argument against central planning of the economy: if such planning could produce a freer and more humane society, or even just a fairer society rather than a competitive society, I would patronise it even if planning was less efficient than competition. In fact, it is my opinion that we should be prepared to pay a high price for freedom’, Karl Popper, *Miseria dello storicismo*, Milan: Feltrinelli, 2013, p. 9 (*Poverty of Historicism*, Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2002). On this concordance between Croce and Bobbio on the compatibility between liberalism and socialism see: Tommaso Greco, *Norberto Bobbio. Un itinerario intellettuale tra filosofia e politica*, Rome: Donzelli, 2000, p. 128.

⁵⁸ Benedetto Croce, *Storia d’Europa* (1932), Laterza, Bari, 1981, p. 32

⁵⁹ ‘Il filosofo e i comunisti’ (interview with Norberto Bobbio by Franco Manni), *Diario*, 4th May 2001, p. 27. Cf. Bobbio, *Eguaglianza e libertà*, Turin: Einaudi, 2020, pp. 30–41

⁶⁰ Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia*, Turin: Einaudi, 1995, p. 129

⁶¹ ‘Augusto Del Noce: fascismo, comunismo, liberalismo’, op. cit., p. 238.

⁶² ‘Il filosofo e i comunisti, interview by Franco Manni’, op. cit., p. 26. When I submitted to him one of my (unpublished) writings on the desirable abandonment – by the current Italian self-styled ‘communist’ parties (or micro-parties) – of the antiliberal legacies of Marxism – Leninism (at least, if not the practical, the theoretical ones), he wrote to me (Turin, 16/8/2000): ‘[your writing] deserves to be widely known. I do not know what can be done to popularise it. I liked it very much: it is an extreme left project without the usual prejudices, including the need for violence, compulsory anti-Americanism, contempt for the liberal tradition of human rights. It is an honest and well-argued defence of historical communism. It does not claim to be current, well aware of the public spirit of today’s Italians, attracted to Berlusconi. You do not make the mistake of the Action Party, which deluded itself into being a party like all the others and was mocked by the realists, who attributed to it the idea of wanting everything immediately. You speak correctly of a resistance party, as the Action Party was in the beginning during the last years of fascism. I share more or less everything you say. But after having had the bitter experience of the Action Party and its rapid failure, I now wonder what you think can be done in practice, to move from idea to action [...]. In my opinion Bertinotti’s decision to bring down the Prodi government was disastrous. What can be done now, faced with the weakness of the DS [Democratici di Sinistra] and Berlusconi’s alliance with the worst right, I don’t know. I don’t even try to make any predictions about how this bad story will end’.

⁶³ *Taccuini di guerra*, op. cit., p. 403

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 289

⁶⁵ ‘Il filosofo e i comunisti, interview by Franco Manni’, op. cit., pp. 26–27.

⁶⁶ ‘Croce e la politica della cultura’, in *Politica e cultura*, op. cit., pp. 78–79.

⁶⁷ ‘Una rara amicizia’, op. cit.

⁶⁸ ‘Crocianesimo in Turin’, op. cit. On the cultural, moral and strictly non-political character of Gobetti’s ‘liberal revolution’ and of his antifascism, I would like to refer to the sections ‘Libertà religiosa come religione della libertà’, ‘Rivoluzione liberale come riforma religiosa’, and ‘Metodi catartici IV: antifascismo senza eroi’ in my book, *Laicità e religione in Piero Gobetti*, with a preface by Norberto Bobbio, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1986; and for the specifically philosophical relationship between Gobetti and Croce to the section ‘Tra pragmatismo gentiliano e storicismo crociano’ in my article, ‘Gobetti e la filosofia’, in *Piero Gobetti et la culture des années 20 (sous la direction de Michel Cassac)*, Nice: Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis, 1999.

⁶⁹ ‘Croce oppositore’, in *Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano*, Turin: Einaudi, 1986, p. 141.

⁷⁰ Another engaging, and more recent, account of this phase of Croce’s life and work is in the chapter ‘La religione della libertà’ in Maurizio Viroli, *Come se Dio ci fosse. Religione e libertà nella storia d’Italia*, Turin: Einaudi, 2009, pp. 279–293.

⁷¹ ‘Ho scelto Croce’, *Tuttolibri* year 15°, n. 570, Saturday 23 September 1989, p. 5.

⁷² ‘Il chierico che non tradi’, in *Il Quotidiano della Basilicata*, 10/01/2004, p. 1

⁷³ ‘Crocianesimo a Torino’, op. cit.

⁷⁴ ‘Il clima culturale e politico nell’età dell’idealismo italiano’ in *Terzo programma: - Nel centenario della nascita di Benedetto Croce*, n. 2, RAI, Torino, 1966, pp. 7–14.

⁷⁵ *Italia civile*, op. cit., pp. 71–77

⁷⁶ Ibidem, p. 78. The essay indicated can be found in: *Croce, Teoria e storia della storiografia*, Milan: Adelphi, 2001, pp. 167–181.

⁷⁷ ‘Ho scelto Croce’, op. cit.

⁷⁸ Ibidem.

⁷⁹ Franco Manni, ‘Emanuele Severino: medium e messaggio’, *Quaderni piacentini*, 12, nuova serie - 1984, pp. 145–165.

⁸⁰ Letter to the author (Cervinia, 17/08/1984)

⁸¹ Letter to the author (Turin, 30/09/1984)

⁸² Because Bobbio esteemed some (not all) positivists: see ‘Croce oppositore’, op. cit., p. 183, and preface to Emilio R. Papa (ed.), *Il positivismo nella cultura italiana*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1985, pp. 11–14.

⁸³ *Profilo ideologico*, op. cit., p. 75.

⁸⁴ *Maestri e compagni*, op. cit., pp. 21, 27.

⁸⁵ Norberto Bobbio, *L’ideologia del fascismo*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1975, p. 52.

⁸⁶ ‘Riflessioni di un ottuagenario’ (1989), *De senectute*, op. cit., p. 118.

⁸⁷ Letter to the author (Senate of the Republic, 4/9/1988). Sofia Vanni Rovighi, a few years earlier (1984), had expressed herself thus: ‘which philosophy is repugnant to me? Nietzsche! In which I see the exaltation of vital values, of the values of human animality [...] not because vital values are not values, but if they are enhanced to the supreme degree and exalted in an absolute way, we arrive at the most terrible negation of the “humanity of man”: “*die blonden Bestien*”’, in ‘Un colloquio’, op. cit., p. 48.

⁸⁸ Heidegger gave precise testamentary instructions that his unpublished works should be published posthumously on a regular basis in order to keep people talking about him, Francesco Barone et al., *Metafisica. Il mondo nascosto*, Bari: Laterza, 1997, p. 45.

⁸⁹ In my own way, in fact, as a teacher and as a citizen and as a friend and as a man it is against this irrationalism that I have been fighting for years and I am fighting especially actively now; also and again – but less than before – I am fighting against a neo-positivist mentality. As a writer my main contribution to this struggle is *Lettera a un amico della Terra di Mezzo. Guida personale di etica filosofica sulle tracce di Aristotele, Freud e Croce passando per Tolkien* (con nota introduttiva di Norberto Bobbio), Milan: Simonelli, 2006 (translated into English as *A System of Ethics as a Letter to a Friend*, Seattle: Amazon DS Kindle Edition, 2013).

⁹⁰ ‘Un invito a Croce’, op. cit.

⁹¹ Benedetto Croce, *Cultura e vita morale* (1931), *Conversazioni critiche serie terza* (1931), *Storia d'Europa nel secolo XIX* (1932), *La storia come pensiero e come azione* (1938), *Filosofia e storiografia* (1949), *Indagini sullo Hegel* (1952).

⁹² I refer to this study of mine for such reflections of Croce: 'La critica di Benedetto Croce al sistema romantico', in *Humanitas*, 1/1990, pp. 33-58.

⁹³ 'Risposte a Domande sull'erotismo', *Nuovi Argomenti*, nn. 51-52, July 1961, pp. 13, 15-17.

⁹⁴ 'Laici e aborto', interview by Giulio Nascimbeni, *Corriere della Sera*, Friday 8th May 1981, p. 3.

⁹⁵ A dialogue with students was, at first, difficult: see 'Resistenza', n. 6 (June 1968), pp. 5-9; and the much harsher articles on 'Resistenza' from April and May 1969. Bobbio gives an account of these articles in the afterword to the volume edition (delayed by almost twenty years by the editor Einaudi!) of his *Profilo ideologico del Novecento italiano*, op. cit., pp. 179-183) which he had written in 1968.

⁹⁶ 'Pro e contro un'etica laica', in *Elogio della mitezza e altri scritti morali*, Milan: Linea d'Ombra, 1994, pp. 167-185.

⁹⁷ *Taccuini IV*, 172-176 quoted in: Gennaro Sasso, *Per invigilare me stesso. I Taccuini di lavoro di Benedetto Croce*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989, pp. 168-169. But five days later Croce wrote the following addition on the same page: 'what I have written is what I feel, but it is not all I feel, because I also feel the shame of complaining about my condition when I think of people whose suffering is much worse and could not follow their calling, that is their vocation in the world, or they saw it broken and suffocated. And then, from time to time, there comes the revival of the warlike spirit, and the feeling that we must fight and move forward, that there is always something good to do, and that this is the only meaning of human life'.

⁹⁸ 'Benedetto Croce', in *Occidente*, op. cit., ref. [17].

⁹⁹ 'Il clima culturale e politico nell'età dell'idealismo italiano', op. cit.

¹⁰⁰ 'Bilancio di un convegno', in: Bobbio-Rovi-Tessitore-Viano et al., *La cultura filosofica italiana dal 1945 al 1980 (atti del convegno di Anacapri, giugno 1981)*, Naples: Guida Editori, 1982, pp. 331, 337-338.

¹⁰¹ Letter to the author (Senate of the Republic, 27/5/1990).

¹⁰² 'Un maestro di questo secolo', op. cit.

¹⁰³ Bobbio, 'Bilancio di un convegno', op. cit. pp. 334-335. I am reminded of what Gennaro Sasso writes on the 'laying off' of Croce (*To invigilate*, op. cit., p. 294): 'the increase of philosophical knowledge [...] did not lead to an expansion of cultural self-awareness, but, mostly, to the substitution of one philosophy for another, in a story in the course of which many philosophical faces appeared, disappeared, reappeared and then disappeared from our horizon (from Russell to Wittgenstein, Carnap, Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche). This horizon was not in fact capable of retaining what it, from time to time, welcomed, and therefore appears, to those who observe it, overcrowded, yet, in the end, terribly empty. It will be the same for Martin Heidegger, who in recent years has been in vogue...'

¹⁰⁴ Bobbio, 'Bilancio di un convegno', op. cit.

¹⁰⁵ *Maestri e compagni*, op. cit., p. 181.

¹⁰⁶ Bobbio, 'Il nostro Croce', in Emanuele Ciliberto and Vasoli (eds.), *Filosofia e cultura: per Eugenio Garin*, Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991, vol. 2, pp. 789-805.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ On these two pro-Machiavellian and anti-Machiavellian traditions which – in the Italian intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – are present both in the right and

in the left, I refer to my study 'I presupposti filosofici ne *La vita italiana* di Preziosi' (in Luigi Parente (ed.), *Giovanni Preziosi e la cultura della razza*, Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino editore, 2005) and specifically the section 'Plutarco, Machiavelli, Mazzini'.

¹⁰⁹ Marcello Dell'Utri on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Croce's death reprinted a thousand copies (not for sale, and with an interesting preface by Enzo Bettiza) of *Quando l'Italia era tagliata in due*.

¹¹⁰ *Etica e politica. Scritti di impegno civile*, Marco Revelli (ed.), Milan: Mondadori, 2009, pp. 1853.

¹¹¹ Bobbio, *Teoria generale della politica*, Michelangelo Bovero (ed.), Turin: Einaudi, 1999, pp. 683.

¹¹² Paola Agosti e Marco Revelli (eds.), Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2009, pp. 224.

¹¹³ *Il corriere della sera*, 13th January 2004, p. 39.

¹¹⁴ *Italia civile*, op. cit. p. 92.

¹¹⁵ 'Il clima culturale', op. cit.

¹¹⁶ 'Un invito a Croce', op. cit.

¹¹⁷ 'Afterword', *Profilo ideologico*, op. cit., p. 179.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 183.