Review essay: Ugo Spirito Comes Full Circle

Ugo Spirito, *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century*, ed. and trans. Anthony G. Costantini. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000, pp. 201, ISBN 90-420-1242-0.

Anthony G. Costantini (ed.), *Anthology of the Works of Ugo Spirito*, trans. Anthony G. Costantini and Alicia Moran. Leiden: Brill, 2022, pp. xix + 277, ISBN 978-90-04-42555-2.

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Ugo Spirito (1896–1979) was a philosopher who changed his mind, repeatedly and sometimes radically, about many of his major commitments. At different times he called himself a fascist and a communist, a positivist and an idealist, a Catholic and an unbeliever. Each of these 'faiths' would occupy him totally for a few years, only to collapse under the weight of fresh doubts. By the end of his life, he had come to see his career as a succession of failures. Just what kind of philosopher he was, then, is unusually hard to judge, and for the most part he has been relegated, at least by Anglophone readers, to a supporting role in the wider dramas of twentieth-century Italian intellectual history.

Anthony G. Costantini's recently published *Anthology of the Works of Ugo Spirito* (hereafter cited as *AWUS*) grants us the most complete picture of Spirito's philosophical work now available in English. It has been in development for a long time—indeed, it was already in preparation when the editor's previous major Spirito translation, *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century*, was published in 2000 (*MTC*, 169). Notwithstanding the gap of more than twenty years between their publications, the books each help us appreciate the foundations on which the other stands. Taken together, they finally enable Anglophone readers to take the measure of a formidable but underappreciated thinker.

Memoirs of the Twentieth Century

Spirito's works included more than forty books, published between 1923 and 1978, the year before his death.[1] The only one to have been translated into English was among the last to be written. He describes *Memorie di un incosciente* (1977), translated as *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century*, as

> …an autobiography, but not the autobiography of a person giving an account of his experiences and suggesting the course of action for the future, which he himself is determined to carry out with the will of a self-assured man… I have entitled this book *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* precisely because I am not the master of myself and I am unable to give explicit direction to my future… The choices I make do not spring forth from a clear self-awareness, but happen as in a performance acted out behind an unknown curtain (*MTC*, 25).[2]

Spirito's point about the title is obscured by the indirect translation. The Italian is *Memorie di un incosciente*, which might have been rendered *Memoirs of a Fool*—though 'fool' carries a pejorative connotation that Spirito's *incosciente*, meaning literally '[one who is] unaware' or 'one in a state of unawareness,' does not. The word refers to a theme of Spirito's late works, in which he described himself as occupying such a state of profound uncertainty, his ideas having been informed by luck and circumstance as much as his own thinking. There is no English word that quite fits the bill, so the translator is left to choose between an ugly phrase (e.g. 'one unaware'), a misleading word that would require an explanatory gloss (e.g. 'a fool,' 'a naïf'), a contrived adjectival noun of a kind that inevitably *feels* translated ('an unaware')—or, as we have here, a new title. At the small cost of fidelity, rendering it *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century* neatly solves the problem and gives readers unfamiliar with Spirito's ideas an indication of the book's scope.

As the late Myra Moss remarks in her foreword, the *Memoirs* might best be read as 'an impressionistic artist's rendering of the author's rather checkered life and career' rather than as a detailed self-portrait or objective account of history (*MTC*, Foreword, n. p.) . Costantini adds that the book is also tonally

[1] I exclude the few works published posthumously.
[2] Also Ugo Spirito, *Memorie di un incosciente* (Milan: Rusconi, 1977), p. 26.

and stylistically uneven, alternating between passages of rigorous 'scholarly presentation' and others that reflect 'the depth of [Spirito's] passions and convictions' (*MTC*, Preface, n. p.).

The book is divided into two halves. The first covers Spirito's summations of the main themes of his ever-evolving doctrine of 'problematicism' and selected moments in his career, including his time in the National Fascist Party, his exploration of communism, his ousting from the Party in 1935, and his 'persecution' by the antifascist *commissioni di epurazione* (Commissions of Political Purges) after the regime fell. The second half comprises accounts of his interactions with six luminaries of Italian public life: the philosophers Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce, the dictator Benito Mussolini, the Fascist politician Giuseppe Bottai, the Italian Communist Party leader Palmiro Togliatti and, indirectly, Pope Paul VI.

What Moss and Costantini do not say is that the principal emotional note of the book is one of deflated hope, tinged at times with the petty indignation of one who feels his ideas were never granted a fair hearing. Through his break with the Fascist regime, his later identification as a communist, and his eventual surrender to listless uncertainty, Spirito insisted that any *true* Fascism should be considered a left-wing political ideology, centred on state control of the economy and an organic conception of the community. He believed that a developed form of corporative economics would enable the regime to realise the original revolutionary potential of the movement. This view was not shared by many in the National Fascist Party—nor, later, were the leaders of the Italian Communist Party receptive to his proposals. He lamented that, a few years after his proposals had been dismissed by the Fascists as so much 'Bolshevist propaganda' (*MTC*, 112) and he had been removed from his university position, 'everything was destroyed and the process reversed itself… The revolution had been started but was then foolishly left to wither' (*MTC*, 45). He was not so naïve as to think that his vision was shared by all members of the Party, but he insisted that Mussolini, 'a true revolutionary,' agreed with him. He claimed, never quite convincingly, that he 'may be the only one who can express a truly objective judgement [about this], since Mussolini confessed himself in an honest manner only to me'. *If only he had had a tape recorder* at their last meeting, he surmised, 'we would now have rare documentation of an original and logical thinker' (*MTC*, 114–6).

Large parts of the *Memoirs* are given over to rulings and correspondence, reprinted verbatim, related to Spirito's travails. Gentile rebuffed Spirito's criticisms, Mussolini did not match his words with his actions, Croce poured cold water on the request to allow publication of his early correspondence, the fascists and the anti-fascists alike gave unhelpful explanations for their decisions to deny Spirito teaching posts, and the Vatican secretaries did not answer his questions about their policies. This exhaustive documentation of futile exchanges with elder philosophers and petty officials, most of which played out thirty or forty years prior to the writing of the *Memoirs*, does not always make for rewarding reading. Perhaps this is the point. As readers, we can at least share in his exasperation. From a historical standpoint, it is interesting to see the commonalities between the Italian bureaucracies of different eras. The Fascists in the 1930s, the anti-Fascist Central Commission of Political Purges in the 1940s, and Vatican officials in the 1960s all proceed in much the same manner, giving perfunctory responses to questions and presenting their judgements as *faits accomplis*. From a philosophical standpoint, though, it is regrettable that Spirito does not go further in elaborating on these exchanges or setting them in a broader context. He assumes that the documents speak for themselves; he does not tell us much about what his exchanges meant for his life or development as a whole. His denial of a wider perspective suggests that the Spirito of 1977 is not really addressed us, as readers, but presenting us with evidence from which we can draw our own conclusions.

The *Memoirs* are episodic, but the episodes do not reveal much about their main character's story, nor of the mind of the person relating it to us. They contain much to catch the interest of students of twentieth-century Italian politics and intellectual history, though few of Spirito's insights are altogether surprising. Mussolini was unreliable and something of an ideological chameleon; Gentile exercised a powerful influence on his students, even when they disagreed with him; Croce had a high opinion of himself; and the fascist and communist movements were both internally divided, being driven as much by personalities as by theories and ideologies. Crucially missing from the book is an adequate account of what Spirito's philosophy involved at each of the moments described.

Anthology of the Works of Ugo Spirito

The curious combination of painstaking detail and no broader perspective in the *Memoirs* is amply compensated by the newly published *Anthology*. This is an impressively rich volume, adding colour, detail, and depth to the suggestive but rather two-dimensional sketch given in Spirito's *Memoirs*. Given Spirito's ever-changing perspectives, it would be easy to underestimate what a deft editorial feat Costantini has achieved. He solves the twin problems of Spirito's prolificacy and self-confessed 'instability' by translating selections from across his entire body of work and arranging these in such a way that they can be read in sequence, interspersed with context-setting commentary. The result is about as comprehensive an overview of Spirito's mercurial thought as we could hope to find in a single volume, carefully curated to enable us to form an overall impression while eliminating many of the repetitions and blind alleys contained in his voluminous writings.

Following the editor's introduction, the content is divided into seventeen chapters, each containing translations of between one and five selections from Spirito's works. These selections are gathered together by theme and arranged to reflect the course of the author's intellectual development. Hence there are chapters on his early and late positivism, pragmatism, actual idealism, fascism, studies of criminal law, corporativism, and problematicism considered by itself and in relation to communism (in his middle period of enthusiasm and from his later, jaded point of view in the 1970s), science, antiscience, democracy, and culture, as well as a general philosophical statement from *Storia della mia ricerca* (History of My Search, 1971) and two on his late submission to a 'state of unawareness'.

The selections are brief but well-chosen. They show us the important lines of continuity running through Spirito's work. One is the 'antinomic' view—which Costantini plausibly calls 'a rebuff to almost three decades of neo-idealist philosophical certainties (*AWUS*, 107)—described in the opening pages of *La vita come ricerca* (Life as a Search, 1937):

> To think means to object. The naïve person listens and believes: his gullible mind accepts words much like his eyes receive light… [As] the first shadow of doubt issues from his soul, and he progressively becomes aware of it, dogma is replaced by the *problem*, thought comes forth. He is no longer a passive listener… The first word that enlivens his discourse also nourishes his

> personality; yet that first word, which defines and asserts his personality, is a terrible monosyllable: *but* (*AWUS*, 107).

This intuition would be the cornerstone of Spirito's 'problematicism' through all its subsequent iterations. While the detailed theory and underlying mood would change, the basic conception of antinomic thinking remained largely intact until the end of his career. Remaining open to the possibility of changing one's mind was, in a sense, the whole point of his project. Amid all the disruptions and innovations of the twentieth century—and, though Spirito could not have known it, the twenty-first—such openness seems apt.

Spirito's work serves as a valuable coda to a period of intellectual history often assumed, at least outside Italy, to have come to an abrupt end around the middle of the twentieth century, following the death of Gentile in 1944 and of Croce in 1952. While Spirito was not quite an idealist after his break with actualism in 1937, he shows us where certain neo-idealist intimations might have led if its proponents had lived to see another era and, perhaps, had been more receptive to the world of the twentieth century, rather than preoccupied with debates carried forward from the nineteenth century, thereby letting their ideas become formulaic and stale. Problematicism represents an evolution of pre-war idealism into a philosophy fitted to a world still recognisably our own.

Yet there is more to Spirito's philosophy than lively reworkings of old material. His changing perspectives on politics, in particular, are interesting from the point of view of history and philosophy. His views on fascism and communism were never doctrinaire, and were justified, in each case, by reference to his own rather idiosyncratic interpretations of their ideal contents. Though enthusiastic about the prospects for communism after his visits to Russia and China in the 1960s, he later became convinced that nominally communist regimes had failed to deliver what their ideology promised, having proved unable to keep pace with the efforts of 'neo-capitalists' to absorb and defuse its revolutionary demands. They had authoritarianism without the benefits of freedom, justice, and means of commodious living that a communist society was supposed to provide. Social democracy coupled with capitalist economics was enough to extinguish the public's appetite for revolutionary change (*AWUS*, 230). The

world had ‘become increasingly more uniform,’ even as ‘reality continue[d] to change without respite’ (*AWUS*, 49). The communist regimes would collapse, or else become communist in name only, as more and more compromises were made. This is hardly a detailed forecast for the future, but it bears reflection, given the political developments since Spirito’s death.

Another theme helpfully illuminated by the omnibus presentation of the *Anthology* is the relationship between science, technology, culture and religion. All his life, Spirito remained refreshingly cognizant of the developments of his era. In the mid-1960s, he thought that science could serve as a universal language, overcoming and gradually eroding differences in ideology and culture. He thought radio, television, cinema and international air travel could enable us to see how other people live and to recognise the parochial bounds of our own cultures. Our conventions are contingent, though it is hard to recognise this while we remain embedded in them. Spirito was reassured by the unshakeable certainty that, while there are many languages, religions, ideologies and cultures,

> Two and two are four; the internal angles of a triangle are equal to two rectangular angles; H_2SO_4 is the formula of sulfuric acid: scientists agree, even if one is Catholic and the other is Muslim and even if one is communist and the other is anticommunist (*AWUS*, 179).

This was ‘the great miracle of the unification of the world’ which scientific discovery made possible. The twentieth century was marked above all by a general increase in ‘velocity,’ he wrote, as people the world over witnessed events ‘that seemed inconceivable until the very eve of their occurrence’ (*AWUS*, 175; *MTC*, 18). But Spirito’s optimism waned as the 1970s progressed. While scientific and technological innovation have helped unify the world by making people more readily understandable to one another, this process does not follow a straight path from irrationality to rationality, along which societies shed their old prejudices and move progressively toward enlightenment. ‘Antiscience,’ including ideology, philosophy, and religion, also makes claims on our beliefs.

In *Storia della mia ricerca* (1971), Spirito went on to propose a scheme for a new, ‘scientific’ problematicism, ‘receptive to clarifying the limits and broadening the concept of science’ to accommodate the myth-making, antiscientific elements of human consciousness (*AWUS*, 207). He left

open the question of just what this clarification and broadening should entail, and his later, jaded moods did not move him to elaborate. Even so, the problem from which that question sprang is still very much a live one. Spirito's point is not that the victory of science over antiscience has been deferred, but rather that their opposition will remain irreconcilable while our conception of science remains too narrow for the more capacious bounds of thought. In more than forty years since his death—and more than thirty since Francis Fukuyama's premature declaration of 'the end of history'—we have seen few signs of imminent unification and consensus, but ample evidence of how religions, philosophies, and ideologies can harden, and minds narrow, when put under pressure to change.

In a passage from another late work, *Che cosa sarà il futuro* (What Will the Future Hold,1977), we find some words of gentle encouragement:

> Even if the journey [of inquiry] is represented by a patchwork of affirmations and negations that constantly contradict each other, we should follow this path even with that little faith that continues to be present in those who believe they have no faith. In other words, we should continue with a *faint hope against hope*, which is the sign of our life, taken in its immediacy. Indeed, the only thing we can [be sure of] is that we are always engaged in a search accompanied by both optimism and pessimism, always striving to reach the only objectives worth pursuing (*AWUS*, 243).

Spirito doubts that he—or any of us—will ever find a complete, incontrovertible, objective truth, the Absolute so much vaunted by Hegelian thinkers. Nevertheless, he insists that we must have faith in the possibility of such final answers. The search may be endless and philosophy may show us only that we know less than we like to think, but we cannot do without it.

Assessing the translation

I have already noted the impressive editorial feat Costantini has achieved with these volumes. To finish, it is worth commenting on the quality of the translation itself.

Some authors—or rather, their works—are more resistant than others to translation into natural-sounding English, since ideas that fit together neatly in one language can appear stiff and clumsy in another. Costantini and Alicia Moran, co-translator of the *Anthology*, succeed in making Spirito's prose read smoothly in English while remaining largely faithful to the form and phrasing of the original texts.

Such sensitivity is well rewarded throughout these translations. Helpful but unobtrusive changes are made for the reader's benefit. Where following the Italian tendency to assign actions to abstract nouns, for example, would produce awkward prose in English, the translators silently transfer actions to more suitable subjects. Hence actions and motives that Spirito assigns to *il problematicismo* are given instead to '*followers* of problematicism' (*AWUS*, 119). The translators thus retain the sense with minimal distortions, giving us a Spirito who speaks intelligible English while retaining his distinctive voice.[3]

A few sentences might have benefited from a further polish, having slipped past copyeditors with distinctively Italian quirks that English cannot accommodate. We read, for example, that

> In the history of philosophy, antinomy, not only has not yet found a solution, but expanded its presence to every aspect of life (*AWUS*, 126).

This is translated from *Inizio di una nuova epoca* (Beginning of a New Era, 1961):

> *L'antinomia della storia della filosofia, non soltanto non ha trovato soluzione, ma si è venuta così accentuando attraverso il suo estendersi a ogni modo di vita.*[4]

The translation, in this case, is too direct. The punctuation and even the double negative—perfectly acceptable in Italian—will not stand in English. A more natural-sounding alternative might be:

> The antinomy of the history of philosophy is not only unsolved, but has been made worse through its extension to every part of life.

Such slips are, however, admirably rare and mostly unobtrusive.

[3] Ugo Spirito, *Il problematicismo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1948), p. 48.
[4] Ugo Spirito, *Inizio di una nuova epoca* (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), p. 275.

Conclusion

Costantini's long-term editorial project has borne valuable fruit. Spirito's work is rich with insight, so its belated availability to Anglophone readers is to be applauded. The *Anthology* will be a valuable resource for anyone interested in twentieth-century Italian philosophy, and may serve as a model of how a large and complex body of work can be distilled into a moderately sized volume. Moreover, it complements and illuminates the *Memoirs*, which Anglophone readers can now appreciate not only as a set of recollections of turbulent moments in Italian history, but as a record of the mixed successes of a long philosophical journey, which ended much as it began—in bewilderment, uncertainty, and a faint hope that, in spite of everything, it was worthwhile.