

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository:<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/176983/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Wakefield, James R. M. 2025. Actualist language in Speculum Mentis. Collingwood and British Idealism Studies 30 (1) , pp. 79-109.

Publishers page: <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/imp/col/202...>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



## Actualist Language in *Speculum Mentis*

James R. M. Wakefield

R. G. Collingwood was reluctant to name his influences. Even so, readers of *Speculum Mentis* (1924) have noted resemblances and connections between the ideas he expressed in that book and those of the Italian idealists whose work he had written so much about in the preceding decade. The extent to which Collingwood drew on actualism, a form of idealism most closely associated with Giovanni Gentile, has been much contested since the book was first published. Linking *Speculum Mentis* with Collingwood's accounts of actualism elsewhere, this article shows that his treatment of thought and language can be understood as a novel reformulation of certain actualist principles, including some that Gentile did not fully elaborate in his systematic works. Though the Collingwood of *Speculum Mentis* was in dialogue with Gentile the intellectual and cultural historian, as well as the systematic philosopher, his answers to the questions actualism raised were quite his own.

I have no time to write about work to which I feel hostile: I only write about the people whom I most closely agree with.<sup>1</sup>

R. G. Collingwood's readers have returned time and again to the question of his relation to Italian idealism. It is not hard to see why. He spent much of his early career translating, interpreting and explicating the ideas of Benedetto Croce, Guido De Ruggiero and Giovanni Gentile, but as he began to develop his own philosophy, he rarely acknowledged them as influences on any specific part of it.

---

<sup>1</sup> R. G. Collingwood, Letter to B. Croce, dated May 27, 1921, quoted in A. Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962, p. 314.

Some guardedness about influence is perhaps unsurprising in a philosopher eager to forge his reputation as an independent thinker after so many years spent promoting the work of other people. Even so, given that in 1920 he considered Italian idealism the ‘liveliest and most constructive export of modern philosophy’ and, by implication, a likely remedy against the growth of realism and logical positivism in Oxford at the time, it is puzzling that he did not position himself more precisely in relation to the thinkers whose ideas he had done so much to publicise, and whose characteristic concerns he seemed to share.<sup>2</sup>

Viewed in this light, *Speculum Mentis* marks a pivotal moment in Collingwood’s development. It represents his philosophy when his questions are most like those of the Italians, though at the same time he makes explicit that he does not want to see his work linked and reduced to any established school or tradition. He conceives of himself as a contributor to a ‘melody’ sung in unison by ‘every genuine thinker’.<sup>3</sup> Despite his protests, reviewers were quick to identify Gentile and Croce among the ‘great philosophers’ in his choir of guiding spirits. Yet those same reviewers disagreed over which voice, if either, was predominant.<sup>4</sup> In the century since, Collingwood’s later works, letters, diaries and notes have yielded a more complex picture of his Italian connections—especially with De Ruggiero—but the picture of *Speculum Mentis* is not much clearer. Some readers consider Croce the principal influence,<sup>5</sup> while others point just

---

<sup>2</sup> R. G. Collingwood, ‘Libellus de Generatione: An Essay in Absolute Empiricism,’ unpublished manuscript, dated 20–23 July 1920, Dep. 28, pp. 1–2.

<sup>3</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis, or The Map of Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Compare, among others, J. E. M. Joad, ‘What is Left of Modern Philosophy,’ *The Spectator*, 133: 5025 (1924), pp. 50–3; L. S. Stebbing, review of *Speculum Mentis; or the Map of Knowledge* by R. G. Collingwood, *The Hibbert Journal*, 23 (1924), pp. 568; F. S. Marvin, ‘An Oxford Sketch of the Evolution of Thought,’ *Nature*, 115: 2881 (1925), p. 79; J. Laird, review of *Speculum Mentis; or the Map of Knowledge* by R. G. Collingwood, *Mind*, 34: 134 (1925), p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> M.-L. Raters, ‘Art, Feeling and Truth: The Central Problem of the Aesthetics of Anglo-Saxon Idealism,’ in J. Connelly and S. Panagakou (eds.), *Anglo-American Idealism: Thinkers and Ideas*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 340; cf. M. A. Raschini, *Gentile e il neoidealismo*. Venice: Marsilio, 2001, pp. 48–9. In a book primarily concerned with Gentile, Raschini identifies Collingwood, especially in *Speculum Mentis*, as ‘alone among the English idealists [in that he was] strongly influenced by Croce’.

as confidently to Gentile<sup>6</sup> or De Ruggiero.<sup>7</sup> Still others, including Croce himself, have regarded the Collingwood of 1924 as confusedly wavering between mutually incompatible influences, the most pernicious of which is actualism, or actual idealism—the system Gentile devised and whose central principles De Ruggiero, Collingwood’s closest friend and ally among the idealists, then still supported.<sup>8</sup>

My aim in what follows is to suggest a new way to understand the place of actualism in *Speculum Mentis*. I begin by asking what Collingwood understood the central tenets of actualism to be and how his account of it, especially in his contribution to ‘Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism?’ in 1923, can help us pick out actualistic threads in *Speculum Mentis*, and show how, in other respects, it might not. Next, I show how Collingwood’s conception of the relation between thought and language may be understood as his attempt to reformulate some actualist principles in a novel way. Finally, I consider what this interpretation means for the vexed question of Gentile’s influence on Collingwood. I argue that, rather than think of Collingwood taking a position on actualism, whether as a critic or an admirer, it is more helpful to picture him refashioning certain actualist concepts to match his own preoccupations and distinctive cast of mind.

---

<sup>6</sup> H. S. Harris, in Giovanni Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1960, pp. 17–19; H. S. Harris, ‘Croce and Gentile in Collingwood’s New Leviathan,’ in *Philosophy, History and Civilization: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on R.G. Collingwood*, eds. D. Boucher, T. Modood and J. Connelly. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995, p. 117; Harris, ‘Gentile’s Reform of the Hegelian Dialectic,’ in *Enciclopedia 76–77: il pensiero di Giovanni Gentile*, vol. 1, edited by S. Betti, F. Rovigatti and G. E. Viola. Florence: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1977, p. 476; and L. Rubinoff, *Collingwood and the Reform of Metaphysics: A Study in the Philosophy of Mind*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970, p. 328.

<sup>7</sup> R. Peters, *History as Thought and Action: The Philosophies of Croce, Gentile, de Ruggiero and Collingwood*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2013; and J. Connelly, ‘Art Thou the Man: Croce, Gentile, or de Ruggiero?’ in D. Boucher, J. Connelly and T. Modood (eds.), *Philosophy, History and Civilization*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995, pp. 92–114.

<sup>8</sup> B. Croce, ‘In Commemoration of an English Friend’ (1946), trans. L. Rubinoff and A. Franklin, in D. Boucher and B. Haddock (eds.), *Letters from Iceland and Other Essays. Collingwood Studies*, 3 (Swansea: R. G. Collingwood Society, 1996); ‘In commemorazione di un amico inglese, compagno di pensiero e di fede,’ *Quaderni della Critica*, 2: 4 (1946), p. 64; and M. E. Brown, *Neo-Idealistic Aesthetics: Croce–Gentile–Collingwood*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1966, pp. 182–3; and W. M. Johnston, *The Formative Years of R. G. Collingwood*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, p. 86.

### 1. Change, actuality, and ‘the new idealism’

*Speculum Mentis* is hard to classify not only because Collingwood declined to identify it with any established school of thought, philosophical *maestro*, or -ism, but also because he makes sparing use of specialist terminology. As he notes early on, he aims to express his ideas, as far as possible, in ‘plain terms,’ employing jargon only when necessary to make himself understood.<sup>9</sup> The Italians were less accommodating of their readers, especially in their systematic works, and each developed a specialised vocabulary, partly inherited from an earlier post-Kantian tradition, but differing in points of detail. Collingwood’s more parsimonious use of jargon, together with his explicit aim of making himself understood, prevents us from determining whether *Speculum Mentis* was an actualist work based on its philosophical idiom alone.

We can circumvent this difficulty by asking, instead, what Collingwood understood actualism to be. A partial answer can be gleaned from his contribution to the symposium on the theme ‘Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism?’ held at the University of Durham in July 1923, just a few weeks before *Speculum Mentis* was completed. Collingwood’s main aim at the symposium was to correct the interpretation of ‘the new idealism’—a label he considered misleading, but which means, for the purposes of the discussion, the philosophy of Croce and Gentile—by the Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill. He objected especially to her characterisation of their idealism as a ‘philosophy of spirit which is also a philosophy of change,’ sharing ‘a fundamental principle, however variously it may be expressed,’ with Henri Bergson’s system, elements of which had appeared in English translation in the previous

---

<sup>9</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 11.

decade.<sup>10</sup> In his attempt to show how Italian idealism in fact *differs* from Bergson's philosophy, Collingwood produced the most sustained examination of actualism, in his own voice, that he ever committed to print. We may confidently assume that the view of actualism Collingwood described in Durham is one he maintained, and was actively thinking through, while he was developing *Speculum Mentis*.

If actualism is not a mystical philosophy of change, as Underhill interpreted it, what is it? At its heart, says Collingwood, is the 'double aspect of the mind as active and passive'.<sup>11</sup> The mind is active to the extent that it thinks and makes its object, passive to the extent that it—including its 'process' of changing endlessly from one state to another—can be thought about and made its own object. It must be both, for without activity, there could be no consciousness. If the mind and its activity could not be objectified in this way, there would be no persisting, changing process of mind, only a succession of discrete minds, each perishing as the next comes momentarily into being.<sup>12</sup>

We may wonder why Collingwood's correction of Underhill on this point should matter, whether for his view of 'the new idealism' in 1923 or for our view of *Speculum Mentis*, a hundred years on. One reason comes from Gentile. In *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana* (The Reform of the Hegelian Dialectic, 1913), he distinguishes the actualist position from those of older idealists. According to Hegel and 'the old Hegelianism,' he writes, being itself is subject to change, whereas for the new Hegelianism, meaning actualism, 'the only change of being is its becoming'.<sup>13</sup> Its becoming occurs in the eternal act of thinking, whereby thought is

---

<sup>10</sup> E. Underhill, in E. Underhill, R. G. Collingwood and W. R. Inge, 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supplementary volumes, 3 (1923), p. 148; see, for example, H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson. London: George Allen and Co., 1913; and commentary in H. Wildon Carr, *Henri Bergson: The Philosophy of Change*, revised edition. Edinburgh: T. Nelson and Sons, 1919.

<sup>11</sup> Collingwood, 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism?', p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> Collingwood, 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism,' p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> G. Gentile, 'La riforma della dialettica hegeliana,' in *La riforma della dialettica hegeliana*, p. 12.

made its own object. We think always *in* the present, but we can think *about* the past, the future, and what is merely possible. In every case, we think about thoughts. In this new dialectic, ‘the process of reality’ is identical to the history of thought.<sup>14</sup>

This stress on the central importance of history and historical thinking is reflected in *Speculum Mentis*, where Collingwood describes every phase of history ‘grow[ing] out of the preceding phase, sum[ming] it up in the immediacy of its own being and thereby sum[ming] up implicitly the whole of previous history. Every such summation is a new act, and history consists of this perpetual summation of itself’.<sup>15</sup> The past, including our past thoughts, and indeed the whole of reality apprehended in thoughts, is a creation of—in Gentilean terms, an abstraction from—the present act of thinking. This means not that the contents of thought and reality are arbitrary or formed as the thinker chooses, only that, in Collingwood’s gloss, the act of thinking ‘does not live apart [from reality] in a heaven of its own from which it issues mandates for the creation of facts,’ like the God of the rationalists. Rather, the act ‘lives in the facts which it creates’.<sup>16</sup> This squares with Collingwood’s view, in *Speculum Mentis*, that time itself is ‘a process not of mechanical change but of thought: a self-knowing process,’ and consequently ‘a mind which knows its own change is by that very knowledge lifted above change’. History itself is ‘the mind’s triumph over time’.<sup>17</sup> The processes of time, history and reality exist in thoughts, as products of actual thinking.

---

<sup>14</sup> Gentile, ‘La riforma della dialettica hegeliana,’ p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Collingwood, ‘Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism,’ p. 167.

<sup>17</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 301.

## 2. Defence or endorsement?

At the Durham symposium, Collingwood reluctantly spoke of ‘the new idealism’ as if it were one broad tradition comprising several branches. Actualism was one of these, and Gentile’s version of actualism, as the first and best-known form, featured most prominently in the discussion. This was a simplification. Gentile’s views, though rooted in the same basic principles, had developed over a series of books and articles, and his students—including, at that stage, De Ruggiero—and his critics, like Croce, focused on different parts of it.

In this section, I draw on some Italian commentators for insights into the nature of actualism and its relation to *Speculum Mentis*.

### *Ugo Spirito*

What did Gentile make of Collingwood’s interpretation? I do not know of any reference to Collingwood in Gentile’s works, aside from a brief remark in a letter to Croce, praising the English translation of *La filosofia di Vico* (The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico, 1913).<sup>18</sup> Happily, we have a useful substitute for him in Ugo Spirito, his most philosophically formidable student and, until the mid-1930s, a self-described true believer in actualism.<sup>19</sup> More cognisant of Anglophone philosophy than his mentor was, Spirito commented on ‘Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism?’ in his book *L’idealismo italiano e i suoi critici* (Italian Idealism and its Critics, 1930).

---

<sup>18</sup> G. Gentile, Letter to Benedetto Croce, dated 10 December 1913, in *Lettere a Benedetto Croce*, vol. 4, edited by S. Giannantoni. Florence: Le Lettere, 2004, p. 271: ‘Yesterday I received the very beautiful English translation of your *Vico*, which has given me great pleasure. And I am very grateful to you [for sending it]’.

<sup>19</sup> U. Spirito, *Memoirs of the Twentieth Century*, trans. A. G. Costantini. Leiden: Rodopi, 2000, p. 61.

Spirito claims that Collingwood's account of actualism shows that he understood it with 'a certain penetration,' which is especially admirable given the widespread misunderstandings among Italian critics.<sup>20</sup> Collingwood grasped both the actualist conception of transcendence as something *inside thought* and its historically oriented conception of becoming. These are fundamental to the actualist conception of 'absolute immanence,' as Collingwood notes.<sup>21</sup> He also avoided the common mistake of identifying actualism with freewheeling relativism or solipsism. Yet Spirito is unsure what to make of Collingwood's 'attitude' toward actualism: he does not make clear '*what he really thinks* about the system which he defends from [Underhill's] unjust criticism'.<sup>22</sup> Collingwood's philosophical *language* seems to Spirito 'somewhat [too] materialistic' for a genuine actualist to use. At the end of Collingwood's paper, claims Spirito, the central problem of actualism—that of accounting for 'the oneness [*unicità*] of the spiritual act'—is capably set out, but unresolved. Without a resolution, he adds, it is impossible to make sense of the 'spiritual concept of history, which is fundamental to thought and action in the new idealism'.<sup>23</sup> Collingwood has given a thoughtful, insightful defence of actualism, but he has stopped short of endorsing it outright.

Spirito did not extend his analysis to *Speculum Mentis*. Even so, his doubts about Collingwood's 'attitude' at the Durham symposium give us a good sense of the interpretive challenge posed by the book. There are themes, lines of argument, and concepts in *Speculum Mentis* that may *remind* us of Gentile's actualist works, with which Collingwood was certainly familiar, but the resemblance is imperfect and intermittent.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> U. Spirito, *L'idealismo italiano e i suoi critici*. Florence: Le Monnier, 1930, p. 114.

<sup>21</sup> Collingwood, 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism,' p. 169.

<sup>22</sup> Spirito, *L'idealismo italiano e i suoi critici*. pp. 116–7; my emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> Spirito, *L'idealismo italiano e i suoi critici*. p. 118.

<sup>24</sup> W. M. Johnston, *The Formative Years of R. G. Collingwood*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, p. 86.

### *Croce and De Ruggiero*

Croce was an outspoken opponent of actualism long before his personal and political split with Gentile. His philosophy was discussed briefly at the Durham symposium. It had ‘vital and fertile’ elements, said Collingwood, but also ‘barren and mechanical’ ones, including the ‘rigid and abstract formalism’ of the four ‘Forms of the Spirit’ in Croce’s early works.<sup>25</sup> Croce’s later remarks on *Speculum Mentis*, first in a review and later in the ‘commemoration of an English friend’ he wrote after he learned of Collingwood’s death, make clear that he blamed the ‘misguiding influence’ of the ‘sublime but empty’ philosophy of actualism for this dissenting note. This malign doctrine was conveyed to Collingwood, writes Croce, by the ‘extreme and very radical’ actualist De Ruggiero, who would later surrender his actualist commitments in response to their ‘merciless refutation’ in Croce’s review.<sup>26</sup>

In his commemoration, Croce does not take credit for Collingwood’s turn away from actualism after *Speculum Mentis*, though he leaves the reader to make the connection. In his review, actualism, Gentile and De Ruggiero go unmentioned—as, for that matter, they do in *Speculum Mentis* itself. Yet he focused his criticism on Collingwood’s preoccupation with finding, in philosophy, a ‘concrete unity’ of every part of experience. Croce thinks this is a vain effort, especially with respect to aesthetic experience, the nature of which must be misdescribed in order for it to be subject to philosophy.<sup>27</sup> This objection echoes one he had long raised against the unifying tendency of actualists, who sought, he argued, to be ‘immersed in actuality’ without making any distinctions between forms of thought, and consequently without really thinking.<sup>28</sup> We may reasonably suppose, then, that Collingwood’s determination to resolve the

---

<sup>25</sup> Collingwood, ‘Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism,’ p. 162.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted from Croce, ‘In Commemoration of an English Friend,’ p. 177–8.

<sup>27</sup> Croce, review of R. G. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis or the Map of Knowledge*, trans. L. Rubinoff and A. Franklin, in Boucher and Haddock (eds.), *Letters from Iceland*, pp. 191–2.

<sup>28</sup> B. Croce, ‘Intorno all’idealismo attuale,’ *La Voce*, 5: 44 (1913), p. 1194

forms of experience into philosophy is what most disturbs Croce in his reading of *Speculum Mentis*.

*De Ruggiero's variation on actualism*

Rik Peters has argued that what Collingwood presents in the Durham symposium is 'not a simple defence of actualism, but an absolute empiricist account of actualism,' which is to say an account mediated through De Ruggiero.<sup>29</sup> The distinction between Gentile's actualism and actualism *per se*, encompassing a point of view or set of principles shared with other thinkers who might disagree on points of detail, helps explain Collingwood's hesitation, even in Durham, in wholeheartedly endorsing the theory he took such pains to explain: '*whatever its shortcomings*,' he wrote, '[Gentile's actualism] is one of the most remarkable [philosophies] of the present day'.<sup>30</sup>

Collingwood noted that De Ruggiero's views were 'pretty well in agreement' with Gentile's, though he did not explain this point in detail.<sup>31</sup> De Ruggiero's most substantial early contribution to philosophy proper, 'La scienza come esperienza assoluta,' Collingwood had called 'a new inspiration' which 'confirmed and defined ideas towards which [Collingwood had] long been travelling'.<sup>32</sup> The theory set out in 'La scienza,' developed while even Gentile's actualism was in its infancy, has features that would be developed, or at least reflected, in Collingwood's work from *Speculum Mentis* onward.

One such feature is De Ruggiero's interest in framing the study of empirical reality in idealist language. He explicitly endorses the actualist precept that 'the act of thought is the absolute

---

<sup>29</sup> Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, p. 249.

<sup>30</sup> Collingwood, 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism,' p. 165; my emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> Collingwood, 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism,' p. 169.

<sup>32</sup> R. G. Collingwood, letter to Guido De Ruggiero, dated 1 July 1920.

perspective of reality [*del reale*]’ and that ‘the actuality of our thought... is itself the world’.<sup>33</sup> As Collingwood put it, ‘the only sense in which Gentile ever denies all transcendence is that he denies *in toto* its right to be considered as the ultimate solution of the problem of philosophy’.<sup>34</sup> This is the principle of ‘absolute immanence,’ which Gentile and De Ruggiero share, but which the latter more thoroughly develops. As the broad thrust of ‘La scienza’ goes to show, De Ruggiero believed that ‘absolute immanence’ can be only a starting point, not a destination set apart from the practice of empirical scientists. The identification of science with consciousness, and by extension philosophy, is a reason for philosophers to take seriously the development of empirical science, not to dismiss it as abstract, mechanistic schematism.

For all that Gentile wrote about the creative capacities of the act of thinking and the need to resolve all of experience into a single category, he is too closely wedded to that central principle to spell out what the activity of thinking *entails* in anything but the rarefied language of dialectics. He tells us that the content of thought changes and the activity of thinking makes this happen, but since that activity *is* reality, it is hard to see how it can also be capable of distinguishing truth from error, assertion from supposal, or itself, as the concrete act of thinking, from a series of thoughts passively received.<sup>35</sup> Gentile identifies error with past or dead thought, or thought made the object of present thinking but not ‘actualised’ in the sense of being endorsed or realised. But this description begs every question, for the business of determining which thoughts are erroneous is treated as though it were solely a philosophical puzzle, not a problem that demands engagement with the world, and the problem of *how* this occurs is obscured by the ‘activity’ that contains all others. Gentile’s explanations were

---

<sup>33</sup> G. De Ruggiero, ‘La scienza come esperienza assoluta,’ *Annuario della biblioteca filosofica di Palermo*, 2 (1912), p. 314.

<sup>34</sup> Collingwood, ‘Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism,’ p. 168.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. the discussion of the ‘ticker-tape model of reality’ in J. R. M. Wakefield, ‘Thinking and Feeling in Actual Idealism,’ *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 26: 4 (2018), p. 796.

typically dialectical and sometimes metaphorical, but never quite satisfactory on their own terms.

De Ruggiero recognised this weakness and sought to correct it in ‘La scienza come esperienza assoluta’. He compares two views of science: first, as a ‘problem’ implicit in empirical reality, somehow independent of thought and available for scientists to study; and second, as a ‘solution’ comprising the totality of known facts. Each, he argues, is untenable. Problem and solution, or question and answer, must be resolved into a single process, which is philosophy. His account of science as the ‘absolute concreteness of reality,’ and that in turn as a ‘synthesis of problem and solution’ may, without too much wilful interpretation, be rendered in Collingwoodian terms as a logic of question and answer.<sup>36</sup> In *Speculum Mentis*, this theme is discussed in connection with art and aesthetic experience. Collingwood writes that Croce, alongside other, unnamed philosophers, fails to explain how the imaginative phase of aesthetic experience, which ‘neither asserts reality, truly or falsely, nor denies it, but merely imagines,’ and whose object is ‘neither real nor unreal,’ is connected to the phases in which such assertions occur.<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt, really, that this transition *somehow* occurs, and indeed *must* occur if we are to make sense of consciousness as something active and creative, rather than a passive witness to claims. But to speak of distinct and essentially separate phases of experience obscures the process, and to insist on some unexplained ‘law of the unity of the spirit’ is to deny the problem without solving it.<sup>38</sup>

What, then, are we to make of Peters’s claim that De Ruggiero was the intermediary between Collingwood and Gentilean actualism? It is understandable that in Durham, Collingwood made Gentile, not De Ruggiero, his main reference point when defending ‘the new idealism,’ since

---

<sup>36</sup> De Ruggiero, ‘La scienza come esperienza assoluta,’ pp. 247, 259.

<sup>37</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 77–78.

Gentile had an independent profile and reputation to defend. De Ruggiero's work as a philosopher in his own right, as opposed to an historian, expositor and interpreter of others, had not been translated into English, and he would retreat to history in the wake of his sharp break with Gentile the year after *Speculum Mentis* was published.<sup>39</sup> In 1923, though, Collingwood shared some of De Ruggiero's earlier concerns about the limitations of Gentile's actualism. Even then, they saw it from different perspectives: writing in 1912, the De Ruggiero of 'La scienza' was a scientifically minded actualist, whereas Collingwood, despite his enthusiasm for what actualism promised, was unwilling to be thought a follower of anyone.

### 3. Actualist elements in *Speculum Mentis*

Given what we have seen so far, which actualist themes or principles feature in *Speculum Mentis*, and in what respects does Collingwood set his position apart from Gentile's?

#### *Provinces and points of departure*

There are significant differences between the philosophers' perspectives and the structures they impose on their ideas. In his systematic works, beginning in the early 1910s, Gentile's principal concern was to tease out the implications of self-conscious thought as an act by which reality is endlessly created, the priority of the act of thinking over anything thought about, and the unity of consciousness. He wanted to show where this conception of thought and thinking leads

---

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Gentile's comments on De Ruggiero's 'La scienza come esperienza assoluta' in his letter to Croce, dated 26 November 1912, in *Lettere a Benedetto Croce*, vol. 4, p. 194. See also J. R. M. Wakefield, 'The Free Spirit: Guido De Ruggiero on Actualism and Politics,' in B. Haddock, R. Peters, and J. R. M. Wakefield (eds.) *Idealism and Experience: The Philosophy of Guido de Ruggiero*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2020, esp. pp. 55–65; C. Gily Reda, 'Guido de Ruggiero's Philosophy of Historical Action,' *Idealism and Experience*, 19–52; and R. Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, p. 145.

if we can avoid the ‘pitfalls [*insidie*] of language’ into which other idealists—that is, all but actualists—had stumbled.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, when the distinctions between the various ‘forms of the spirit’ distinguished in his early works are restated in his mature works, such as the *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* (General Theory of Spirit as Pure Act, 1916), they appear briefly and late in the argument, as passing stations on the way to the perspective of eternity.<sup>41</sup> The substance remains the same, however. The spirit, or mind, has three ‘absolute forms,’ which are art (consciousness of the subject), religion (consciousness of the object), and philosophy (consciousness of the synthesis of the two). These are *necessary* forms, he adds, corresponding to the three possible positions in a dialectical relationship.

Collingwood’s point of departure is a little different. Rather than appeal to a universal form of thinking, he lays out three assumptions. First is that, in ‘the field of experience,’ *five* distinct ‘provinces’ can be distinguished, namely art, religion, science, history, and philosophy. Second is that each of these constitutes ‘a concrete form of experience’ and ‘an activity of the whole self’. Third—which he calls ‘the vital point’—is that each of these concrete activities is ‘in some sense a kind of knowledge, an activity of the cognitive mind’. He adds, significantly, that his list of five ‘provinces’ is provisional, and has been adopted because grouping problems under these headings ‘gives us a convenient starting-point’. His stipulation that they be regarded as concrete activities is intended as a bulwark, also provisional, against ‘the schematism of a faculty-psychology’.<sup>42</sup>

Collingwood’s selection of five provinces rather than Gentile’s three, together with his insistence on the arbitrariness of his selection, is not a substantial difference. His list of five is

---

<sup>40</sup> Gentile, *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, p. 21; and *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, p. 25. See also ‘The Method of Immanence’ (1912), trans. L. Lloyd and J. Wakefield, in B. Haddock and J. Wakefield (eds.), *Thought Thinking: The Philosophy of Giovanni Gentile*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2015, pp. 235–75.

<sup>41</sup> See *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act* and *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, chapters 13–15.

<sup>42</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 39 and 57.

provisional, as we have seen, and Gentile grants history and science places in his system, albeit as forms of knowledge subordinate to philosophy. A more telling difference is Collingwood's unwillingness to let the demands of theory overrule those of the experience it is intended to illuminate. In this he follows the early De Ruggiero, who, as we have seen, sought to make space in an actualist scheme for a view of science as 'the true and absolute reality of the world'.<sup>43</sup> At the same time he anticipates the later De Ruggiero, who complained that the kind of idealism, meaning actualism, he had endorsed in his youth turned every question into 'a game of formulae'.<sup>44</sup> Gentile's bare selection of absolute forms is constrained by the triadic structure of the dialectic—together, no doubt, with his lack of interest in empirical inquiry—to exclude science and to elide history with philosophy. Collingwood, drawing on the language of idealism but unconstrained by its formalities, is free to adapt the picture to suit his purposes.

### *Thought and action*

The idea that each concrete form of experience is an *activity* plainly chimes with the tenets of actualism, though it is hardly an explicit endorsement. Art, religion, history, science and philosophy can be regarded as activities without the support of any special metaphysical system, after all. To draw a closer connection, we need to know what place Collingwood assigns to the act of thinking in his broad philosophical outlook. Consider this passage from the Prologue, the first sentence of which Peters calls 'the motto of [Collingwood's] philosophy':<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> De Ruggiero, 'La scienza come esperienza assoluta,' p. 328.

<sup>44</sup> G. De Ruggiero, 'Idealism Reconsidered' (1933), trans. J. R. M. Wakefield, in *Idealism and Experience*, pp. 343 and 346–7.

<sup>45</sup> Peters, *History as Thought and Action*, p. 399.

All thought exists for the sake of action. We try to understand ourselves and our world only in order that we may learn how to live. The end of our self-knowledge is not the contemplation by enlightened intellects of their own mysterious nature, but the freer and more effectual self-revelation of that nature in a vigorous practical life.<sup>46</sup>

The sentiment Collingwood expresses is plain enough. Thought (in general, perhaps, but philosophical thought especially) should serve some practical purpose, not just satisfy the idle curiosity of philosophers. Life gives rise to the questions we have occasion to answer, and philosophy can help us both to answer them and to determine whether our answers make sense. But a life is in an important sense incompletely lived if it is spent attending to the ‘enlightened intellects’ represented on one’s bookshelves, learning only lessons applicable to other books.

Does the passage express an *actualist* sentiment? The gap Collingwood leaves between thought and action should give us pause. After all, for the actualist, (active, concrete) thought and action are strictly one and the same. Collingwood expresses the thought in an idiom more naturalistic than any Gentile would use, recognising that the direct identification of thought with action is unilluminating. The life Gentile describes is always *the life of the mind*, not only in the strict sense that actualism requires (there can be no activity independent of the act of thought), but also in the sense that, by his lights, it consists largely of activities that involve thinking about, reading and writing books. Collingwood’s ‘burden of daily tasks’—one thinks of him philosophising by ‘sailing a boat or telling stories to a child,’ or else sketching, working in his garden, or wondering whether he has stretched his tape measure—does not, for Gentile *qua* philosopher, come into the picture.<sup>47</sup> In the much later ‘essay on practical philosophy,’ *Genesi*

---

<sup>46</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 15.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted phrases are from Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 15 and 214.

*e struttura della società* (Genesis and Structure of Society, 1946), Gentile would make the telling remark that, ‘be it a man or a book or a problem that faces us, it is all one,’ which might serve as a summation of his overall attitude.<sup>48</sup>

### *Unified minds*

What of the unity of consciousness or mind? Collingwood presents this as a historical matter rather than a hard-won philosophical discovery. For example, he claims that a man in the Middle Ages ‘had firm hold’ on the unity of mind, since ‘no activity, for him, existed in its own right and for itself’. Mediaeval art, religion, and philosophy were intertwined, each shaping and colouring the others.<sup>49</sup> What is interesting here, for present purposes, is not so much the truth or falsity of this historical claim as what it reveals about Collingwood’s worldliness in his choice of examples. We can see more clearly what is at stake in the idea of the unity of mind if we view it through a historical lens rather than a dialectical one.

Whatever reservations we may have about the plausibility of Collingwood’s characterisation of the Middle Ages—Croce complains that it is ‘quite considerably idealised and simplified’<sup>50</sup>—this is a vivid depiction of a concept central to Gentile’s thought about the history of ideas, if not so much to actualism considered as a system. Writing about medieval poetry, for example, Gentile notes that for Dante, ‘poetry cannot attain value [unless it originates] from... the sole source of any value in the view of medieval man... [that is] from that reality which exists not in the human spirit, and by virtue of its action; but that Spirit which

---

<sup>48</sup> G. Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society*, ed. and trans. H. S. Harris. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1960, p. 77. ‘[An] essay on practical philosophy’ (*saggio di filosofia pratica*) is the subtitle of the Italian version, but not of Harris’s English translation.

<sup>49</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Croce, review of *Speculum Mentis*, p. 190; cf. *La Critica. Rivista di Letteratura, Storia e Filosofia*, 23 (1925), p. 57.

alone is act: [the] act which creates the world, and man within it; and which scatters all the seeds of life'.<sup>51</sup> On Dante's Thomistic account, this capitalised 'Spirit,' distinct from the human spirit, is God—the *Spirito Santo* (Holy Spirit) integral to St. Thomas's God, which is 'pure act,' or pure actuality, 'without any potentiality'.<sup>52</sup>

The idea that religion in the Middle Ages was integrally connected with art, philosophy and culture at large is a commonplace, but by connecting the Holy Spirit of mediaeval Christianity with the language of actualism, especially its distinctive conception of 'spirit,' Gentile anticipates Collingwood's view that 'there was no feeling that these purposes [art and religion] stood by themselves'.<sup>53</sup> For both thinkers, the unity of reality—which, as might go without saying, is always reality perceived from a particular historical point of view—depends upon the unity of the spirit. Gentile reframes the medieval Spirit as the modern spirit of self-conscious thinking, while Collingwood argues that the modern world, fractured and adrift from the old binding certainties, needs to recover and recast its mind in a new synthesis. In either case, it is the unifying activity of the spirit that makes reality a self-consistent whole.

Discussing *Speculum Mentis* in 1928, De Ruggiero noted that, 'reading the book, we never come up against the mere formalism into which the Italian idealistic school of [actualism] finally settled'.<sup>54</sup> Whether as a result of principle or personality, Collingwood is determined to show that the unity of mind means something; he recognises the risk that idealist philosophising results in an endlessly self-referential cycle, restlessly rearranging metaphysical deckchairs until alienated from the very life, world, and culture that first gave rise to its questions. One

---

<sup>51</sup> G. Gentile, *Giordano Bruno e il pensiero del Rinascimento*. Florence: Vallecchi, 1920, pp. 249–50.

<sup>52</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1920. I, Q3, A2.

<sup>53</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 28.

<sup>54</sup> G. De Ruggiero, *Filosofi del Novecento*, fourth edition. Bari: Laterza, 1950, p. 92. As in note 29, above, I have translated De Ruggiero's '*idealismo attuale*' as 'actualism'.

way to understand the intermittent echoes of Gentile in *Speculum Mentis* is to think of the book as Collingwood's attempt to reformulate the actualist commitment to the unity of mind in terms more amenable to the earlier Gentile, the intellectual and cultural historian, than to the later Gentile, the systematic philosopher.

#### 4. Sap, stimulus, and the actualising of language

So far, I have commented on the ways in which Collingwood develops the concepts of mental activity and the unity of mind, which feature prominently in actualist theory. This is not (yet) to make a claim about the influence of actualism on *Speculum Mentis*, except in the obvious sense that Collingwood was steeped in Italian philosophy at the time he wrote it and expressed his ideas in forms consonant with its technical vocabulary and themes. He recognised the tendency of actualism to end in self-referential formulae that reproduce a kind of alienation from the world different from the one Gentile sought to overcome with his rigorously conceived method of immanence. Even so, the foundational image of actualism—the self-conscious act of thinking that endlessly creates, unifies, and is immanent in reality—is plainly one that appealed to him, though not, perhaps, for quite the reasons Gentile intended.

#### *Actualising language*

The unity of mind is represented in *Speculum Mentis* in another line of reasoning, which runs through most of the book. This begins with the distinction between explicit and implicit features of experience and thought, to which he draws attention in a footnote to Chapter 3. There are, he writes, principles 'really present' in certain forms of experience—in the practice of an artist, for example, or the use of language—even if the experiencer is not conscious of them. They are *implicit* principles, which may be made explicit under scrutiny, as when a

theologian spells out the principles already implicit in the religious consciousness of a believer. But the second-order explicator's activity is different to the first-order experiencer's activity, just as the business of an art critic is different from that of an artist.<sup>55</sup> In *talking about* religion, the theologian is practising not a kind of religion, but a kind of philosophy. Similarly, the art critic, or the philosopher of art, can explain and interpret an artwork by reference to its underlying principles, but the explanation and interpretation are not part of art.

Collingwood further develops this theme in the next chapter, in which he turns from art to religion. 'The key to the comprehension of religion is a principle which in religion itself exists only implicitly,' he writes. 'This principle is the distinction between symbol and meaning'.<sup>56</sup> The language of religion is freighted with symbolic meanings, and to treat religious pronouncements as statements of literal, natural fact is to misconstrue their purpose. Collingwood gives the example of receiving the bread and wine of the Eucharist, as set out in the Anglican Catechism. The ritual has an implicit meaning quite different from the prescribed form of words. To say that 'the body and blood of Christ... [are] taken and received by the faithful in the Lord's Supper' is, by any ordinary measure, a false description of what goes on when communicants take bread and wine. Throughout the ritual, the bread and the wine remain literally, objectively what they were when they were baked or bottled and bought. Yet the ritual has an implicit meaning—as a show of commitment to a community of the faithful and a set of shared norms, say—which the natural scientist would miss by treating the literal meaning simply as bad science, and which the philosopher (or the anthropologist, or I earlier in this sentence) would misconstrue by separating the superstitious and the rational elements and thus

---

<sup>55</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 85n–86n.

<sup>56</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 122.

articulating it in a form that the ordinary believer does not. Only from the perspective of the believer, in that moment, can the real meaning be made out—or, better, felt.<sup>57</sup>

How far do these remarks square with Gentile's characterisations of art, religion and philosophy? Once again, his terminology is different from Collingwood's, and his Catholicism stands on different metaphorical footing from Anglicanism, but the substance of the theory is markedly similar. His more rigid conceptual scheme, too, makes it harder for him to distinguish clearly between implicit and explicit parts of thought, since thought is, from a strictly actualist point of view, self-transparent; it is exactly what it is conscious of being. The root of religious sentiment, he writes, is 'the feeling of otherness and opposition, or rather, the loss of one's autonomy and one's self, and therefore the need to give oneself, to let oneself be taken up and carried': it is through religious experience that we come to see ourselves as part of the universe and at one with God.<sup>58</sup> Through philosophy, we come to see ourselves as what we most fundamentally are, in the eternally unfolding act of thinking. But this does not mean that the mystical part of religious experience, such as the medieval saint's 'annihilation' before God, is closed off from the philosopher, any more than a philosopher is prevented from being transported by a novel or a piece of music.<sup>59</sup> This is what Collingwood meant when, in the Durham symposium, he said that for Gentile, 'transcendence is always present, but it is never the last word'.<sup>60</sup> That last word belongs to the philosopher.

---

<sup>57</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 123–4.

<sup>58</sup> Gentile, 'Le forme assolute dello spirito,' esp. pp. 238–9.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. G. Gentile, 'Nuova dimostrazione dell'esistenza di Dio,' *Introduzione alla filosofia*, second edition. Florence: Sansoni, 1952 [1932]; and J. R. M. Wakefield, 'The Idea of God in the Actualist Tradition,' *Il Pensiero Storico*, 8 (2020), pp. 139 and 149–50.

<sup>60</sup> Collingwood, 'Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism,' p. 168.

*Truth, language, and fiction*

It is worth considering just what position Collingwood assigns to thought and thinking in his account of the relations between art, religion, and philosophy. Are the experience and activity of the Anglican communicant, during the ritual of the Eucharist, distinguished from those of the theologian, the anthropologist, or the philosopher as forms of *thought*, or something else, which becomes thought when it is later rationalised, explicated, and raised to the level of philosophy? Collingwood hints at an answer in a remark on religious education:

The truth grows up in a scaffolding of fiction within the child's mind; deprive it of the scaffolding and it will never grow, or at best... will grow crooked and misshapen... All religion conforms to this type. It is all, from top to bottom, a seed growing secretly, surrounded by an integument which is not itself the living germ but only its vehicle. It is thought growing up in the husk of language, and as yet unconscious that language and thought are different things.<sup>61</sup>

The image of language as a husk or protective layer surrounding thought is instructive. We can draw two parallels with Gentile's work, and above all the educational work *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica* (Outline of Pedagogy as a Philosophical Science; two volumes, 1913–14). Collingwood compared this work favourably with Gentile's later *Sistema di logica come teoria di conoscere* (System of Logic as Theory of Knowledge, 1917–1923), which he found 'disappointing,' 'thin and schematic,' lacking in 'sap,' and unstimulating.<sup>62</sup> As well as an overview of the main features of Gentile's educational theory, expressed in the language of systematic actualism ('too difficult for a book intended for schools,' complained

---

<sup>61</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 125.

<sup>62</sup> R. G. Collingwood, Letter to de Ruggiero, dated 2 September 1926, quoted in J. Connelly, 'Collingwood, Gentile and Italian Neo-Idealism in Britain,' in *Thought Thinking*, 208n11.

Croce),<sup>63</sup> its first part, entitled ‘*L’uomo*’ (Man), contains the most systematic presentation of spirit before the *Teoria generale*, and by some measures it exceeds even that.

One way in which the *Sommario* contains more ‘sap’ than the *Logica* is that, like much of Gentile’s early work, it is grounded in the author’s experiences of educational practice, which give concrete significance to his descriptions of the spirit’s rhythm, development, and self-creation. The *Logica* is more thematically varied than its title suggests, but it lacks such a concrete foundation. There is a clear sense in which we each create and recreate the world for ourselves as we think and learn about it to attain higher levels of understanding. Likewise, following Collingwood, we can understand what it means to say that the mind is supported by a scaffolding of fiction, or successive sets of such scaffolding, each taller and more complex than the last, as the truth grows up within it and our understanding of the world is progressively refined. Gentile’s discussions of language, discipline, and the unity of knowledge, too, mean something different when applied to a student in a classroom rather than the spirit considered in the abstract. We want to learn (or teach) well rather than badly, to understand what we are doing and why we are doing it, and ultimately to make sense to ourselves and each other.

Another parallel may be drawn with Gentile’s account of language in the first volume of the *Sommario*. He argues that words are ‘alive and full of meaning... only in the context of discourse,’ which is to say, in actual use. Likewise, ‘there are no [discrete] sensations, only sensation in its eternal unity,’ and, as we have seen, no thoughts, only the eternal unfolding of concrete thinking.<sup>64</sup> As Collingwood insisted at the Durham symposium, we can intelligibly *talk about* the meanings of words, sensations, and thoughts, and we neither could nor should

---

<sup>63</sup> B. Croce, Letter to G. Gentile, dated 7 November 1912, quoted in Gentile, *Lettere a Benedetto Croce*, vol. 4, p. 203n.

<sup>64</sup> G. Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica*, vol. 1, *Pedagogia generale*, fifth revised edition. Florence: Sansoni, 1959 [1913], p. 57.

try to do without them. Rather, their meaning depends upon the spiritual or mental activity that gives rise to them. ‘Language is not thought’s clothing,’ says Gentile; rather, ‘it is its very body’.<sup>65</sup> Someone who cannot hear, speak or write may be said to use language, even without the sounds and signs that we might ordinarily assume to *be* language.<sup>66</sup> But really, the signs and sounds are the clothing or the vehicle for thought. Language *is* the thought.

How does the view of language as the ‘very body’ of thought compare with Collingwood’s view of thought ‘growing up in the husk of language... as yet unconscious that language and thought are different things’? At first glance, these seem mutually opposed: for language to be ‘the very body’ of thought is not for language and thought to be different in kind. But this, appropriately, is principally a difference in the use of words, not in the underlying conception of thought. As Collingwood puts it elsewhere in *Speculum Mentis*, ‘Information may be the body of knowledge, but questioning is its soul’.<sup>67</sup> For him, as for Gentile, the self-conscious business of thinking, in the sense of pondering, reviewing, or analysing, depends upon a more fundamental activity of thinking, questioning, or consciousness in the round, which includes our intuitions, sentiments, inarticulate half-thoughts and misapprehensions.

In the second volume of the *Sommario*, Gentile describes the interrelations between the ‘special didactics’ of art, religion and philosophy, as well as their relations to the mind or spirit enriched by those thereby educated. ‘Knowledge [*sapere*] is unified, not abstractly, but in the spiritual actuality in which it is realised,’ he writes. ‘The school, therefore, successfully does its job so far as it makes space for unified knowledge in spiritual actuality’.<sup>68</sup> In the school curriculum

---

<sup>65</sup> Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia*, vol. 1, p. 62–3.

<sup>66</sup> Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia*, vol. 1, p. 58; see also J. R. M. Wakefield, ‘Thinking and Feeling in Actual Idealism,’ *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 26: 4 (2018), pp. 787–90.

<sup>67</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 78,

<sup>68</sup> G. Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia come scienza filosofica*, vol. 2, *Didattica*, fifth revised edition. Florence: Sansoni, 1955 [1914], p. 66.

he instated as Minister of Public Instruction (1922–4), religion gave way to philosophy once a child had attained a certain age and level of comprehension, but the aim was to have the latter build on the foundations established by the former. What vitally matters for Gentile is that the development of the spirit, from its beginnings in the interior ‘dream world’ of a child’s imagination, through ritualised forms of reflection in religion, and finally at the heights of self-consciousness in philosophy, is not stifled by an education that prevents these parts from fitting together in a unified consciousness.<sup>69</sup> Religious instruction is useless if it makes no lasting difference to the pupil’s enduring sense of herself and her relations to others, and the slate must be wiped clean again when she comes to learn philosophy a few years later.

Collingwood’s account of the grades of aesthetic and religious experience enables us to tell the same story in a different way, beginning with the child who thinks of God as a kind of invisible, sympathetic father figure, looking down from the sky and listening to whispered prayers. The child later comes to see that this is only an image, a way of picturing something that calls for the simultaneous use of imagination, fellow-feeling and rationalisation to appreciate completely.<sup>70</sup> ‘Feeling religious in bed is no substitute for the Eucharist,’ notes Collingwood. Implicit in this remark is a whole conception of what thinking involves.

## 5. Influence and dialogue

We have seen ample evidence that Collingwood was thinking with and about Italian idealism, and actualism in particular, at the time he wrote *Speculum Mentis*. Nonetheless, the book was not intended to be a covert gloss on Gentile. It is rather Collingwood’s attempt to press beyond

---

<sup>69</sup> G. Gentile, *Preliminari allo studio del fanciullo*, ninth edition. Florence: Sansoni, 1968 [1924], pp. 22; and ‘L’unità della scuola media e la libertà degli studi’ (1902), in *La nuova scuola media*, second revised and expanded edition, edited by Hervé A. Cavallera. Florence: Le Lettere, 2003, pp. 14–17.

<sup>70</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, pp. 112–13 and 124–5.

the limitations of Gentilean actualism (among other things) and to establish his own distinctive philosophical standpoint, conscious that his peers in Britain and Italy alike would be only too quick to classify him as a follower of some established philosopher if he let them. James Connelly notes that Collingwood ‘resented being labelled,’ and was accordingly ‘wary of employing any philosophical idiom which stood between him and his readers or allowing them the easy option of dismissal by association’.<sup>71</sup> His non-committal strategy met with mixed success. His readers wasted no time in linking him with some likely influences but, as the persistent disagreement over labels goes to show, he resisted firm and final classification.

As late as August 1926, three years after he completed *Speculum Mentis* and some fifteen months after the Italians split over their opposing manifestos,<sup>72</sup> Collingwood told De Ruggiero that he was in the process of refining the ideas he had set out in that book, ‘helped greatly, but not wholly satisfied, by Croce and Gentile’.<sup>73</sup> He had read a good deal of Gentile’s writings, including some that were never translated into English—we cannot be sure quite which ones, beyond the few titles he cites in other works.<sup>74</sup> He had also read plenty of work, actualist and otherwise, critical of Gentile’s philosophy, and this, combined with his independent spirit, meant that he was never a wholehearted convert.

The imperfect parallels between Gentile’s work and *Speculum Mentis* grant us a better perspective on Collingwood’s later judgement that actualism was an ‘arthritic’ form of

---

<sup>71</sup> J. Connelly, ‘Collingwoodian Controversies,’ in *An Autobiography & other writings*, eds. D. Boucher and T. Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 404.

<sup>72</sup> See [G. Gentile] ‘Manifesto of the Fascist Intellectuals’ (1915) and [B. Croce] ‘Manifesto of the Anti-Fascist Intellectuals’ (1925), both in *From Kant to Croce: Modern Philosophy in Italy 1800–1950*, ed. and trans. Brian P. Copenhaver and Rebecca Copenhaver. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, pp. 707–12 and 713–16.

<sup>73</sup> R. G. Collingwood, Letter to G. De Ruggiero, dated 18 August 1926, quoted in D. Boucher, ‘Collingwood and European Liberalism,’ in Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 383.

<sup>74</sup> This is well put by M. E. Brown, *Neo-Idealistic Aesthetics*, pp. 182–3: ‘In answer to any claim that Collingwood’s aesthetics is either Crocean or Gentilean, one must raise the question: With which particular Crocean or Gentilean aesthetics is his thought being identified? The reductive, unhistorical thought which leads to facile identifications of Collingwood with either the actualists or Croce is as gross a blunder as the belligerent notion that Croce and Gentile were utterly antagonistic to each other.’

idealism, constrained by a rigid formula to obscure the very activities it purported to illuminate. By focusing too rigidly on the necessity of the act of thinking, claims Collingwood, Gentile neglects ‘the problem of the relation between perspectives’:

[E]ach man’s perspective is for him [Gentile] a subjective-idealistic world, in which the object is not spirit (*pensiero pensante*) but idea (*pensiero pensato*). The problem of development... has been wholly overlooked by Gentile, with the result that Fascist thought, egocentric and subjective, can rightly be called by Croce *antistoricismo* [anti-historicism].<sup>75</sup>

The proper formulation of these different perspectives is the principal task Collingwood set himself in *Speculum Mentis*. While the activity of thinking—Gentile’s ‘spirit’—underlies all our other engagements with the world, and philosophy, the spirit’s reflection on itself, unifies those other engagements, we still need to take seriously the distinction between philosophy and other forms of thought. A theory that denies the development necessary to attain a full and clear view of the world we live in is to be rejected. But the clinching factor in Collingwood’s rejection of actualism is revealed at the end of the passage just quoted. While he did not engage with Gentile’s pre-Fascist political philosophy, the way some commentators subsequently equated actualism with the philosophy of Fascism *with Gentile’s consent* was reason enough for Collingwood to conclude that actualism was in some way inadequate to the task a ‘general theory’ should be expected to perform.

Here, too, there are salutary lessons concerning the nature of influence and philosophical allegiance in general, and Italian public intellectuals in particular. Recalling Collingwood’s

---

<sup>75</sup> R. G. Collingwood, ‘Notes Towards a Metaphysic,’ in *The Principles of History and Other Writings in the Philosophy of History*, ed. W. H. Dray and W. J. van der Dussen. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 128–9.

allusion to his positivist contemporaries' mistaken views of the nature of language as it relates to judgements of logical accuracy,<sup>76</sup> we might think similarly about the nature of philosophical influence in relation to actual philosophising—and, beyond that, to the business of the intellectual historian who later tries to reconstruct that relationship. As we look upon Collingwood's philosophical work as part of intellectual history, it is tempting to imagine that his relation to the texts and writers purported to have influenced him is much the same as the relations of his modern-day interpreters to his works and to him; and that in principle it should be possible to trace each position he adopts, described in works like *Speculum Mentis*, to a position someone else has adopted in another text. This is to treat *influence* as another word for *interpretation*.

Influence is more nebulous, less direct, and ordinarily less self-conscious than interpretation of the kind just described. Which of another author's ideas seem especially salient or worthy of consideration as we later reason out our own arguments is not just a matter of whether we agree with their conclusions, but instead of how they shape the course of our thinking. Books and thinkers we find disagreeable or even incomprehensible may be just as present in our minds as those with which we agree. We talk to ourselves, asking and answering questions as we read them, and they contribute to an ongoing dialogue comprising other voices we have read, digested, and internalised. In actualist terms, this dialogue expresses the 'rhythm' of the spirit, which realises its universality as it determines itself as one spirit in particular, participating in an ongoing exchange of give and take. As Collingwood reads, thinks through, and digests the words of others, he changes his mind; but at the end, as at the beginning, it is *his* mind that changes, *his* mind that thinks.<sup>77</sup> Whether the mind he describes in *Speculum Mentis* reflects

---

<sup>76</sup> Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, p. 11.

<sup>77</sup> Compare Gentile, *Sommario di pedagogia*, vol. 2, p. 117; and J. Wakefield, 'Talking Their Way out of Relativism: Collingwood and Gentile on the Nature of Inquiry,' *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 19: 2 (2013), pp. 139–68.

anything *but* Collingwood's, as he 'fashions the universe after his desires'—for self-consistency, no more than lightly intellectualised artistic expression, a hopeful sort of religion, a worldly dose of science, and a keen awareness of history—is a question Susan Stebbing raised in an early review.<sup>78</sup> Similar questions might be asked of any thinker embarking on a project like that of *Speculum Mentis*.

None of this amounts to a strong claim about the *influence* of actualism, or of Gentile in particular, on Collingwood and *Speculum Mentis*. Influence is not just a matter of agreement, as I have said. Another actualist motif—the internal dialogue—is instructive here. Like Collingwood's scaffolding of fiction, this is a metaphor with a purpose; and like Collingwood's nameless 'spirits of the spheres,' those in our cast of interlocutors have supporting roles to play in the development of our subsequent thoughts, sometimes catching us unawares with some new question or objection while we later work out our ideas in private. We think with our philosophical influences in much the same way, whether or not we know them personally. They speak to us, and those conversations continue as we go on thinking for ourselves.

We may say, then, that Gentile figured prominently in Collingwood's chorus, but was never dominant in it. Collingwood was determined that no voice should be, except his own. He is thinking through elements of actualism, but he views it always, if sometimes just barely, from the outside. The metaphor of dialogue again helps explain why. A philosophy need not be judged solely as an arrangement of arguments, and a theory can stand independently of the theorist who devised it, but we can still regard ourselves as in some sense *taking sides* when we decide in which philosophical idiom to express our ideas. Collingwood's dialogue with

---

<sup>78</sup> Stebbing, review of *Speculum Mentis*, p. 568.

Gentile never resulted in him becoming a wholehearted actualist, but it inevitably informed his view of the problems of philosophy in *Speculum Mentis* and the works that followed.