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REDISCOVERING COLLINGWOOD'S SPIRITUAL HISTORY (IN AND OUT OF CONTEXT)¹

DAVID BATES

ABSTRACT

Collingwood has often been depicted as a neglected and isolated thinker whose original ideas on the contextual nature of truth (in both history and philosophy) anticipated important trends in postwar thought. The spiritual aspects of his thought, however, have often been problematic, precisely because they seem to conflict with his more influential ideas. Although Collingwood's overtly theological and metaphysical writing can be safely confined to an early, perhaps even juvenile phase of his career, the spiritual dimension of some of his later work, including, for example, the famous doctrine of reenactment, has often been marginalized, repressed, or domesticated in order to preserve Collingwood's historical place in twentieth-century philosophy of history. This radical conflict continues to disrupt both the reception of Collingwood's ideas and attempts to contextualize them historically. However, if the spiritual and theological nature of Collingwood's thought is taken seriously, and not marginalized, it is hard to see his career as discrete stages of development. The problem of transcendent identity was a central concern for Collingwood throughout his career, and it unifies much of his thinking on divergent topics. The problematic idea of reenactment actually opens up a complex connection in Collingwood's thought between ethical action, historical time, and our relationship with divine reality. It is this rediscovery of Collingwood's spiritual ideas on history that leads to a reevaluation of his own historical context, for it becomes clear that these ideas were neither eccentric nor old-fashioned. The problems Collingwood was addressing link him with a much broader movement of European thought in the interwar period, one that was trying to mediate transcendent reality and concrete historicity in a situation of crisis and fragmentation.

I

“. . . we experience recollection as something which forbids us to conceive of history as thoroughly a-theological, just as we dare not write it in terms of immediate theological concepts.”
— Benjamin

In 1927, Collingwood, reviewing two books on Epicurus for T. S. Eliot's *Criterion*, commented: “By refusing to modernize [Epicurus] or detach him from

1. Teresa Smith kindly gave permission to quote from Collingwood's unpublished manuscripts. This project was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Post-Doctoral Research Fellowship. Critical interventions by Susan Crane, Michael Geyer, Harry Harootunian, and E. J. Hundert were much appreciated, while Harvey Mitchell provided invaluable criticism and support. Steven Wolfe's collaboration was essential.

his true historical setting, we thus at last confer upon him a genuine timelessness, and make him an integral part of our own world.”² This intricate, almost paradoxical interplay of historicity and universality is an important (though at times almost invisible) thread running through Collingwood’s thought. It can be traced in his early theological writings, in his metaphysical work, in his late ideas on concrete duty and universal good, and perhaps most conspicuously, in his central doctrine of re-enactment in history. Yet Collingwood’s suggestion that “genuine” meaning is bound up with the immediate historical context of an author seems curiously inappropriate in his case, for Collingwood himself was persistently out of context in his own time, and thus achieved fame only posthumously. Moreover, his reception has also been marked by a continued resistance to this very juxtaposition of historicist models and faith in some kind of transcendental understanding. These two difficulties—Collingwood’s original isolation and neglect, and his problematic reception—may be connected. A re-evaluation of both his intellectual context (which has been partly obscured by some of these resistances) and his own ideas on “context” and continuity in history, can help prepare a rediscovery of his seemingly paradoxical approach to historical knowledge. This approach to history is centered, it will be suggested, on the idea of the “spiritual.”

There is no question that Collingwood seemed uncomfortable in his “true historical setting.” Professionally and intellectually dissociated from the main currents of thought in interwar Britain, Collingwood was seen as defending dying traditions, writing in a self-consciously “literary” style at odds with a professionalizing academy, tackling then unfashionable philosophical topics (like art and history), and also ranging over a wide variety of subjects just as philosophy was becoming more specialized.³ Collingwood rarely attended professional meetings, and did not often engage contemporary debates, except as a hostile critic.⁴ He was a “wayward and defiantly isolated” individual, a “recluse,” who also roamed outside the normal boundaries of academic philosophy, pursuing a career as an archeologist and historian of Roman Britain.⁵ It

2. R. G. Collingwood, review of *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, ed. Cyril Bailey, and *Epicurus: His Morals*, collected and transl. Walter Charleton, in *The Monthly Criterion* 6 (1927), 371–372.

3. See A. M. Quinton, “Contemporary British Philosophy,” in *A Critical History of Western Philosophy*, ed. D. J. O’Connor (New York and London, 1964), 535; H. J. Paton, “Fifty Years of Philosophy,” in *Contemporary British Philosophy: Personal Statements*, ed. H. D. Lewis, 3rd series (London and New York, 1956), 345, 349–350; C. Levy, “Mind under G. E. Moore (1921–1947),” *Mind* 85 (1976), 42; and Pierre Dubois, *Langage et métaphysique dans la philosophie anglaise contemporaine* (Paris, 1972), 13.

4. See Gilbert Ryle, “Philosophical Arguments (Inaugural lecture, Waynflete Chair in Metaphysics, 1946),” in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer (Glencoe, Ill., 1959), 329; and A. J. Ayer, *Part of My Life* (London, 1977), 74.

5. See Anthony Quinton, “Ayer’s Place in the History of Philosophy,” in *A. J. Ayer Memorial Essays*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement 30 (Cambridge, Eng., 1991), 31; and T. M. Knox, “R. G. Collingwood,” *Dictionary of National Biography 1941–1950*, 169b. On Collingwood’s place in the history of archeology in Britain, see Margaret Browning, *Theories, Facts, and Artifacts: R. G. Collingwood and the Baconian Revolution in Romano-British Studies* (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 1989).

is not entirely surprising, then, that Collingwood's philosophical work suffered neglect in this period. Gilbert Ryle's exchange with Collingwood, in a minor series of articles, is the exception which proves the rule.⁶ For his part, Collingwood became increasingly critical of most other "academic" philosophers, a stance which only contributed to his professional marginality.⁷ The uneasy Delegates for the Oxford University Press even described his polemical *An Autobiography* (1939) as "an alarmingly controversial if not defamatory little book," since it linked Oxford philosophers with the rise of fascism.⁸ So Wittgenstein, applying for G. E. Moore's vacant Cambridge chair in 1939, despaired when he learned Collingwood was one of the electors for the position. "Can you imagine him voting for me?" he is said to have remarked.⁹ By the time of his death in 1943, Collingwood resisted all classification; suspected of Marxism, criticized for skepticism, accused of dogmatism, he was largely alienated from the professional community. Obituaries would in the end often describe him as a noted archeologist rather than an influential philosopher. Collingwood might easily have been remembered only for his contributions to the history of Roman Britain.

Of course, Collingwood eventually became famous for the one book he never wrote, the posthumous collection of lectures, essays, and manuscript fragments published as *The Idea of History* in 1946. With the emergence of a postwar debate on the philosophy of history, his thought was resurrected in a more congenial context and assumed a new importance. As David Boucher has recently written: "Collingwood's modest reputation during his own lifetime testifies to the *perversity* of the judgements often made by an author's contemporaries, compared with those judgements made after the passage of time has intervened to distance a text from its immediate context."¹⁰ In a way, Collingwood can only be understood "detached" from his historical setting, liberated from a hostile context that never recognized his true significance. However, although Collingwood is now an established figure in twentieth-century thought, his new home has not always been entirely congenial. There has, in fact, been a continued resistance to Collingwood's work, even among more sympathetic critics, a resistance centered on his curious, sometimes frustrating juxtaposition of historicity and transcendence. From the beginning, Collingwood's work was divided by his editor and former student T. M. Knox into early—perhaps juvenile—theological work, a mature period of philosophical brilliance, and a late, destructive skeptical relativism.¹¹ Of course, Collingwood has also been cele-

6. Gilbert Ryle, "Mr. Collingwood and the Ontological Argument," *Mind* 44 (April 1935), 137–51, and Ryle, "Back to the Ontological Argument," *Mind* 45 (January 1937), 53–57.

7. See Stephen Toulmin, "Conceptual Change and the Problem of Relativity," in *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, ed. Michael Krausz (Oxford, 1972), 203.

8. Peter Sutcliffe, *The Oxford University Press: An Informal History* (Oxford, 1978), 247.

9. Related by M. O'C. Drury, in *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford, 1984), 141. See also Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London, 1990), 464.

10. David Boucher, *The Social and Political Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Cambridge, Eng., 1989), 21; my italics.

11. T. M. Knox, "Editor's Preface," to Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946).

brated for this radical historicist approach, although in this context his strong religious faith is usually ignored, along with his acknowledged affinity for more “empathic” forms of understanding. Efforts to see Collingwood as a “transcendental historicist,” inspired by Christianity, are not only on the margins of Collingwood criticism, but they have not always addressed some of his problematic (more radical) later work which seems at odds with his more “idealist” thinking.¹² Attempts to interpret Collingwood’s work have, in response, either highlighted his inconsistencies, his “confusions and contradictions,” bizarrely blamed his skepticism on a series of strokes, posited a “radical conversion” to historicism in his career, plotted dialectical movements to explain the shifts, or simply repressed aspects of his thought in order to give it some coherence and practical value.¹³ And while Collingwood’s Christianity is now recognized as an important aspect of his thought, it is seen as essentially a *philosophical* problem that the critic must strive to integrate, successfully or not, into his larger context of ideas.¹⁴ There is no one satisfactory synthesis of Collingwood’s work, in part because of the inner tensions in his philosophical and historical thinking. More recently, it has been suggested “we have to accept, rather than explain away, inconsistencies, and that Collingwood was a historicist who could never work out a coherent position in relation to relativism.”¹⁵

This is one reason why Collingwood, while an acknowledged hero in the philosophy of history, has become somewhat of a museum piece in that field, having never really found a home in a tradition with contemporary relevance. Critics are now exploring more the archeology of Collingwood’s ideas; a recent “reassessment” of him, for example, included two articles discussing his alleged authorship of an early minor text.¹⁶ Certainly, his profound contributions to narrative analysis, his sophisticated historicist position, his “deconstruction” of historical practice, and his original ideas on the intimate link between “evidence” and questions, put him at the forefront of that twentieth-century intellectual move away from questions about the meaning of history, to studies on *how* historians create meaning, how the past is actually put together within concrete historical circumstances.¹⁷

12. For example, see Lionel Rubinoff, “The Relation between Philosophy and History in the Thought of Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood,” and Alan Donagan, “A Comment on Lionel Rubinoff’s ‘The Relation between Philosophy and History . . .,’” in *Thought, Action, and Intuition as a Symposium on the Philosophy of Benedetto Croce*, ed. L. M. Palmer and H. S. Harris (Hildesheim, Germany, 1974), 9–47, 75–85.

13. See Alan Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Oxford, 1962), quote 279; Knox, “Editor’s Preface,” xxi; and Louis O. Mink, *Mind, History, and Dialectic: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (Bloomington, Ind., 1969).

14. See James Patrick, *The Magdalen Metaphysics: Idealism and Orthodoxy at Oxford 1901–1945* (Macon, Ga., 1985), 80–83; and Lionel Rubinoff, *R. G. Collingwood and the Reform of Metaphysics* (Toronto, 1970).

15. Boucher, *Social and Political Philosophy*, 214.

16. James Patrick, “Is ‘The Theory of History’ (1914) Collingwood’s First Essay on the Philosophy of History?” *History and Theory, Beiheft 29* (1990), 1–13; James Connelly, “Was R. G. Collingwood the Author of ‘The Theory of History?’” *ibid.*, 14–20.

17. See Michael S. Roth, *Knowing and History: Appropriations of Hegel in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca, 1988), ix–x. See also Patricia Lombardo, “The Ephemeral and the Eternal: Reflec-

However, Collingwood's almost "postmodern" approach to the relativism of historical understanding (and the historical nature of philosophical and scientific thinking) seems completely at odds with what was for him a central doctrine: the theory of re-enactment, which postulated a real, metaphysical link with past thought. Critical or not, commentators are not often sure what to do with this unusual theory.¹⁸ The usual explanation is that re-enactment is merely a solution to an *epistemological* problem (one created, in fact, by a historicist analysis), and not a serious *method*, though this rational interpretation eliminates the spiritual, almost mystical dimensions of re-enactment as Collingwood originally described it.¹⁹ Alternatively, this seemingly strange theory has been displaced (along with Collingwood himself) into another context altogether, namely hermeneutics. And it is true that Gadamer did describe Collingwood as almost "out of context" in his native English environment; reading him in German, Gadamer said, "he is no stranger to us," and he is like someone returning from abroad to his "spiritual homeland."²⁰ Yet despite his immense respect for Collingwood, Gadamer never embraced re-enactment, where thought, he noted, "seems to have a strange life of its own." This direct connection between past and present is too simplistic; the subtleties of hermeneutical mediation escape Collingwood: it is the contextual logic of question and answer that really interests Gadamer (and other Continental thinkers).²¹ Re-enactment,

tions on History," in *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics, and the Psyche*, ed. Michael S. Roth (Stanford, 1994), 389–403.

18. Re-enactment is often either "difficult to grasp," or it "makes little if any sense." See, for example, W. J. Van der Dussen, *History as a Science: The Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood* (The Hague, 1981), 317, and L. B. Cebik, "Collingwood: Action, Re-enactment, and Evidence," *Philosophical Forum* 2 (1970), 68.

19. See Van der Dussen, "Editor's Introduction" to Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. (Oxford, 1993), xxvii–xxviii. A recent monograph on re-enactment from this rational perspective notes that Collingwood's comments on survival and revival of thought are "slightly disastrous," leading to an "unhappy conclusion," which has to be modified by a rather violent interpretation of what Collingwood "actually means by his undeniably somewhat obscure 'survival' thesis." See Heikki Saari, *Re-enactment: A Study in R. G. Collingwood's Philosophy of History* (Åbo, Finland, 1984), esp. 37–52. William H. Dray, reviewing Saari's book, agrees that those who believe re-enactment is a form of intuition must be wrong, since this idea "meshes badly" with Collingwood's other thinking. See *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), 931.

20. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Einleitung," to Collingwood, *Denken: Eine Autobiographie*, transl. Hans-Joachim Finkeldei (Stuttgart, 1955), vii.

21. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., transl. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York, 1989), 513, 516; cf. 515, 536. Paul Ricoeur repeats this criticism of Collingwood in *Time and Narrative*, transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1988), III, 146–147. Collingwood's theory of re-enactment is called "unfortunate," though the logical priority of the question is affirmed by H. I. Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* (Paris, 1954), 40, 58–59. Carl Schmitt noted the parallel between Collingwood's logic of question and answer and the political structure of "challenge and response" (while lamenting Collingwood's anti-German tone in *The New Leviathan*) in his "Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-Gegensatzes von Ost und West," in *Freundschaftliche Begegnungen: Festschrift für Ernst Jünger zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Armin Mohler (Frankfurt am Main, 1955), 151–152. Hans Robert Jauss draws on both Collingwood's re-enactment theory and the logic of question and answer, in "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, transl. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982), 21, 29.

no matter what context, even the context of Collingwood's own thought, is problematic, a constant source of irritation to his commentators.²² Joseph Margolis identifies the "unfathomed mystery" and "unacceptable extravagance" of Collingwood and re-enactment theory as one reason why he is a thinker so difficult to apply or even classify.²³ Collingwood's posthumous rehabilitation has often required a domestication of the re-enactment doctrine (whose central position in *The Idea of History* cannot be safely ignored) in order to defend it against accusations that it is naive, inconsistent, irrational, even mystical, and thus not philosophically serious.

This defensive position was a reaction to some early critiques of *The Idea of History*.²⁴ Some philosophers simply could not understand Collingwood's conviction that historical understanding is "a situation in which one mind is directly aware of another," where past thoughts are precisely revived in the present.²⁵ If Collingwood was saying that thought "stands outside of time" and endures until "revived," then, as Patrick Gardiner wrote, "the suggestion of some sort of telepathic communication with past thoughts is too insistent to be entirely disregarded."²⁶ Collingwood seemed to be advocating not just a resurrection of the past but a kind of "communion with its reality."²⁷ The theory of re-enactment, where the historian is the "host" for revived thought, was dismissed as "indulgence in clairvoyance" and "mysticism," since this "exquisite symbiosis" between the historian and the past could only be achieved by going into some kind of trance.²⁸ As Ayer would later write, "that the historian should literally incarnate a multitude of persons seems to me incredible."²⁹ Sympathetic critics have constantly defended Collingwood's theory from these kind of attacks. As Leon J. Goldstein loudly proclaimed: "How these direct, immediate, non-thinking forms of mental communication have been foisted upon a writer so unambiguously committed to thinking must be one of the most remarkable intellectual accomplishments of our time."³⁰ Critics have safely reinterpreted

22. See James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, "Editor's Introduction: Questions of Evidence," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), 738-739; Philip Barker, *Michel Foucault: Subversions of the Subject* (London, 1993); F. R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley, 1994), 30, 51, 126; and Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), 773-797, who claims that Collingwood disregards the "political reality" of the context of the historian's experience: "Thinking on his own means owning his own thoughts" in a kind of "proprietary relationship" (783-784).

23. Joseph Margolis, *The Flux of History and the Flux of Science* (Berkeley, 1993), 29-30, 35.

24. See Margit Hurup Nielsen, "Re-enactment and Reconstruction in Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *History and Theory* 20 (1981), 3-4. Nielsen presents an intriguing interpretation of re-enactment as a form of "conversion," reconstructing past reflective thought from its embodiment in tangible "traces," in the attempt to clear Collingwood from any alleged "intuitionism" (31).

25. W. H. Walsh, "The Character of a Historical Explanation," *Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 21 (1947), 59.

26. Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (Oxford, 1952), 39.

27. Georges Lefebvre, review of *The Idea of History*, in *Révue historique* 202 (July-September 1949), 133.

28. G. J. Renier, *History: Its Purpose and Method* (London, 1950), 44, 48, 81.

29. A. J. Ayer, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1982), 211-212.

30. Leon J. Goldstein, "Collingwood's Theory of Historical Knowing," *History and Theory* 9 (1970), 32, n. 48.

the idea of re-enactment as an epistemological position which merely established that a universal logical context is necessary for any historical understanding to take place.³¹ However, allegations of Collingwood's affinity for mysticism and clairvoyancy may not really be so ridiculous.

It is easy to forget that the early twentieth century was a period of great interest in the study of extrasensory perception (as it was then called), a phenomenon that challenged traditional models of mental communication.³² The Society for Psychical Research (SPR), established in London in 1882 to investigate these phenomena objectively, was a respected, academic, and professional body, which had over the years included Freud as a corresponding member, John Ruskin (whose secretary was Collingwood's father) as an honorary member, and Henri Bergson as president.³³ By the interwar period, parapsychology was increasingly a topic of intense discussion among intellectuals and the more general public.³⁴ C. D. Broad and A. N. Whitehead tried to integrate these ideas into their philosophical work.³⁵ H. H. Price, an Oxford philosopher whose work would influence Ayer, wrote in 1940: "Once telepathy is admitted, the sharp distinction between one mind and another breaks down." If these were, as he said, "queer speculations," it was also true that "the facts are too important to ignore."³⁶ Well into the 1950s, philosophers in Britain would debate such questions.³⁷ Parapsychology was part of a larger intellectual trend of dismantling individualistic, "rational" epistemologies. In philosophy, for

31. See Alan Donagan, "The Verification of Historical Theses," *Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1956), 193–208, and Van der Dussen, "Editor's Introduction," xxv–xxvii. That Collingwood did not intend any methodological status for re-enactment is, according to Van der Dussen, established "conclusively" (xxviii). For a recent version of the "logical" interpretation of re-enactment, see John Luckman, "Metaphysics, History, and the Unpublished Manuscripts," *International Studies in Philosophy* 23 (1991), 27–45.

32. See John Beloff, *Parapsychology: A Concise History* (London, 1993), esp. chapters 4–5; and Seymour H. Mauskopf and Michael R. McVaugh, *The Elusive Science: Origins of Experimental Psychical Research* (Baltimore, 1980).

33. On the SPR, see John J. Cerullo, *The Secularization of the Soul* (Philadelphia, 1982); Renée Raynes, *The Society for Psychical Research 1882–1982* (London, 1982); and Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (London, 1968).

34. Stimulated by, for example, J. B. Rhine's influential scientific work at Duke University, classical scholar Gilbert Murray's less formal explorations of "thought-transference" at Oxford, and fascinating investigations such as Upton Sinclair's Mental Radio experiments. J. B. Rhine, *Extra-Sensory Perception* (Boston, 1934), and Rhine, *New Frontiers of the Mind* (New York, 1938); Duncan Wilson, *Gilbert Murray OM 1866–1957* (Oxford, 1987), esp. chapter 20; Upton Sinclair, *Mental Radio* (Monrovia, Cal., 1930). Albert Einstein (somewhat reluctantly) contributed a preface to the German edition of this last book.

35. Broad, at this time, was postulating a "substratum" of thought underlying individual minds, modified by particular experiences, but which could not itself be assigned possessive adjectives like "mine" and "yours." See C. D. Broad, "Presidential Address to the Society for Psychical Research (1935)," in *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research: Selected Essays* (London, 1953), 67. On Broad's involvement in the SPR, see his "Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of C. D. Broad*, ed. Arthur Schlipp (New York, 1959), 1967.

36. H. H. Price, "Some Philosophical Questions about Telepathy and Clairvoyance," *Philosophy* 15 (1940), 384–385. On Price and Ayer, see Quinton, "Ayer's Place," 33.

37. See, for example, the symposium "Is Psychical Research Relevant to Philosophy?" *Aristotelian Society*, supplementary vol. 24 (1950), 173–231.

example, “dialogical” thinkers in the theological tradition were discussing how thought and ideas existed on the frontiers of individual consciousnesses connected in a greater whole.³⁸ Theological writers often looked to assimilate the results of parapsychology. For example, the *Hibbert Journal*, a theological review to which Collingwood often contributed, published articles on these topics.³⁹

Mysticism was also enjoying both a popular and (in theology) professional revival in this period, especially in Britain. Baron von Hügel’s influential work had appeared in English, W. R. Inge (Dean of St. Paul’s) was writing analyses of mystic and gnostic thought, and Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* went through twelve reprints between 1911 and 1930. Underhill, who published extensively on these topics, was in fact a good friend of Collingwood and his sister; they had all worked together in naval intelligence during World War I.⁴⁰ Collingwood worked in an intellectual context predisposed to the more mystical dimensions of mental activity. Even Wittgenstein’s massively influential *Tractatus* was centered on the problem of “the mystical,” though British positivists hardly stressed this aspect of his thought.⁴¹

So it is no surprise that Collingwood addressed these issues. In a 1923 panel on mysticism and “new idealism,” for example, Collingwood, responding to Underhill’s critique of the Italian philosophers, admitted: “The necessity of the mystical experience lies in the principle that we discover new truths by an act of the mind which reaches out beyond the given, grasps the new thought as it were in the dark, and only after that consolidates its new conquest. . . .”⁴² For Collingwood, mystic insight into the unity of the “whole” was immediate and unreasoned, but laid the foundation for any subsequent rational analysis. This whole was logically prior to the “parts,” even though it was essentially invisible and could never be completely known.⁴³ Thought was something rather elusive, skirting the boundaries separating empirical reality, the individual mind, and the secret unity of the universe. In 1928, the same year as his essay “Faith and

38. Most notably in the works of Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy.

39. For example, see D. F. Fraser-Harris, “The New Era in Psychic Research,” *Hibbert Journal* 31 (1932), 12–25. Leslie Belton argued that there was psychic evidence of a “supra-individual” field: “it would appear that the individual mind is an island subterraneously linked with other island minds,” where there are no “impenetrable boundaries” between them. See Leslie Belton, “The Implications of Telepathy,” *Hibbert Journal* 43 (1944–1945), 250–251, and cf. his “Individualism and Self-Transcendence,” *Hibbert Journal* 33 (1935), 585–595.

40. Dana Greene, *Evelyn Underhill: Artist of the Infinite Life* (New York, 1990), 68, and Christopher J. R. Armstrong, *Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), An Introduction to Her Life and Writings* (London, 1975), 160.

41. On this point, see Russell Nieli, *Wittgenstein: From Mysticism to Ordinary Logic. A Study of Viennese Positivism and the Thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Albany, 1987).

42. Collingwood, “Can the New Idealism Dispense with Mysticism?” *Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary vol. 3 (1923), 174.

43. Collingwood explored this theme in a number of essays on faith and reason, reprinted in Collingwood, *Faith and Reason: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Lionel Rubinoff (Chicago, 1968), and in a review of M. C. D’Arcy’s *The Nature of Belief*, in *Criterion* 11 (January 1932), 334–336.

Reason,” Collingwood was elaborating his first version of the re-enactment doctrine in a manuscript entitled “Outlines of a Philosophy of History.” Here Collingwood would make the rather strange claim that “thoughts are not private property,” while introducing his idea that the historian’s thought is not a “copy” of past thinking, but actually *contained* the past thought itself, as it is repeated, re-thought, in the present.⁴⁴ While Collingwood would refine these ideas in his lectures on history over the next decade, he would continue to probe the more unusual dimensions of thought, and was himself quite open to more “psychic” forms of understanding. In his manuscripts on metaphysics and cosmology from the early 1930s, for example, he described the intersubjective world as essentially dialogical,⁴⁵ “penetrated throughout by internal relations,” and even discussed the possibility of communicating with what he called *other-worldly* minds, other embodiments of spirit, although here he felt that the differences between these alien forms of thought and our own mental world were too great: “this seems to rule out *clairvoyant* experience of them,” he admitted, but went on to say: “although I am quite willing to admit clairvoyant experience of the past, the spatially remote, and the future in our own world.”⁴⁶ This may explain Collingwood’s rather cryptic comment in *An Autobiography*: “If there were a past event which had left no trace, nobody – no historian, I say nothing of other, more highly gifted persons – would know anything about it.”⁴⁷ In this context, Collingwood’s story of his childhood encounter with Kant reads almost like a description of a clairvoyant experience of his future self: “Then . . . came the strangest emotion of all. I felt that the contents of this book, although I could not understand it, were somehow my business: a matter personal to myself, or rather to some *future self of my own*.”⁴⁸

A knowledge of Collingwood’s context certainly complicates our understanding of his more well-known work on historical epistemology. Not only does the spiritual relation between minds at the center of re-enactment assume new significance, some of Collingwood’s other ideas on this theme must acquire new resonances. The important Dilthey-like distinction in *The Idea of History* between the repeatable “inside” and manifest “outside” of action, for example, may well parallel Underhill’s own “inside” and “outside” of life; as she wrote, individuals are “compound creatures,” “dwellers in time, yet capable of eternity.” In this framework, human action was part of an ongoing history, a “spiritual inheritance,” which transcended the merely external events of the

44. Collingwood, “Outline of a Philosophy of History” (1928) in *The Idea of History*, rev. ed., 441–450.

45. Collingwood, “Notes Towards a Metaphysic [five red notebooks],” Dep 18, Book Δ, “I and you,” 24ff. (Collingwood’s manuscripts on deposit at the Bodleian library at Oxford University will be cited by title, box number [e.g., Dep 8], and page number [when appropriate]).

46. *Ibid.*, Book B, 121, 80a, note.

47. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1939), 96.

48. *An Autobiography*, 4; my italics.

moment.⁴⁹ Exploring this theme, the Russian exile Nicolas Berdyaev, in his mystically inclined *The Meaning of History* (translated in 1936), described the relationship between inner and outer history in a way that echoes Collingwood's own idea of re-enactment. "The external facts of history have a tremendous importance. But the inner current of mysterious life, whose flow even external reality cannot intercept, is much more important. . . . It proves that history is to be apprehended only from within and that this apprehension depends more and more on the inner state of our consciousness. . . ."⁵⁰ While it is obvious that Collingwood did not write in this "mystic" mode, the often neglected spiritual dimension of re-enactment, which relies so much on the controversial idea of the *survival* of thought across time and between "contexts," may be rediscovered by reading *The Idea of History* from a more mystical perspective. This reading will subsequently open up an intriguing line of thought in Collingwood's work. Rather than marginalizing Collingwood, this context will reveal some affinities with important currents in European philosophy.

II

"It is not that we men have thoughts, but rather thoughts come to us, mortal men, for whom thought is the very cradle of being."
— Heidegger

Re-enactment is given its fullest treatment in two key sections of Collingwood's "Metaphysical Epilogomena" to his 1936 lectures on the philosophy of history: "Re-enactment of Past Experience the Essence of History" and "The Subject-Matter of History," which constitute §§ 4–5 of Part V ("Epilogomena") in Knox's *The Idea of History*.⁵¹ Collingwood first tries to explain here how there can be "identity in difference," which is not altogether clear at this point, although he emphasizes that he means something other than mere "numerical" difference, that is, where two things are just exact replications of a given uni-

49. Evelyn Underhill, "The Inside of Life" (1932) in *Collected Papers of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Lucy Menzies (New York, 1946), 120–121, 112. Cf. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 213–214. Underhill wrote in 1925 that "we are, then, faced by two concepts, both needful if we are to make any sense of our crude experience: the historical, natural and contingent; the timeless, supernatural and absolute. They must be welded together, if we are to provide a frame for all the possibilities of human life. . . ." Underhill, "Our Two-Fold Relation to Reality," *Hibbert Journal* 28 (1925), 219.

50. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, transl. George Reavey (London, 1936), 25. While it is true that Berdyaev is hardly an important figure in contemporary contexts, his works were widely read and translated, and a major thinker like Bakhtin would admit he considered Berdyaev his main philosophical opponent. Bakhtin "thought that man and God carried on a free dialogue between themselves," while Berdyaev emphasized the idea that God actually *needs* man. See Nicholas Rzhevsky, "Koshinov on Bakhtin," *New Literary History* 25 (1994), 435. On Berdyaev, see *Bibliographie des oeuvres de Nicolas Berdyaev*, ed. Tamara Klépinine, with a biographical introduction by Pierre Pascal (Paris, 1978).

51. Knox repressed the metaphysical title, and neutralized the title of the first section somewhat by rendering it "History as Re-enactment of Past Experience." See Van der Dussen, "Editor's Introduction," xiii–xiv. Further references in the text are to Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, 1946), abbreviated *IH*. (The text of the "revised" edition is a photo-reprint of this original edition.)

versal (*IH* 285). Collingwood wants to argue that two thoughts in successive time can be truly *identical* (not merely similar), despite having very tangible distinctions. This identity is possible between actual thoughts in time precisely because “thought” itself stands “outside of time.” Thought, Collingwood is trying to say, steps in and out of time at concretely different locations (particular minds) without losing its essential identity as thought (*IH* 287). There is no difference among discrete thoughts in history: rather, thought, which is essentially outside of time, *differentiates itself* by entering into concrete contexts of thinking. The historian, in one sense, is only a participant in this greater process: “the gap between present and past must be bridged not only by the power of present thought to think of the past, but also by the power of past thought to *reawaken itself* [my emphasis] in the present” (*IH* 294). This image of revival is constantly repeated in this text. Collingwood is not being metaphorical here. Thought may be embedded in the transient psychological individuality of the mind, but it also exists and persists outside these particular contexts. “The peculiarity of thought,” writes Collingwood, “is that, in addition to occurring here and now in this context, it can *sustain itself* through a change in context and *revive* in a different one” [my italics] (*IH* 297; cf. 300). These successive thoughts are really repeated embodiments of a transcendent identity. Difference does not affect this identity: in fact this difference in repetition is merely the condition of its specific appearance in the temporal world. Thought cannot “repeat itself *in vacuo*, as the disembodied ghost of a past experience,” Collingwood said. It must appear in a context, yet it is never wholly identified with that context, which is only ever a temporary host for what is essentially a non-temporal act. The implication is that at one level at least, thought is never wholly “original.”⁵²

For Collingwood, thought of this kind follows an itinerary that veers in and out of “history.” The identity of historically constituted thoughts is not, then, a *logical* one, established by abstracting shared characteristics from essentially independent events. Thought is more than a mere event or situation: repeatability is in its very structure. It is no wonder, then, that the individual mind, though a necessary home for thought, cannot be considered the foundational ground of history. The thought “itself” traverses history. At this point in his argument Collingwood admits that these are “vague phrases,” but he also writes that they describe something very “real,” “namely the way in which thought, transcending its own immediacy, survives and revives in other contexts; and to express the truth that individual acts and persons appear in history *not in virtue of their individuality as such* [my italics], but because that individuality is a *vehicle* of a thought which, because it was actually theirs, is potentially everyone’s” (*IH* 303). The historian obviously cannot be a mere observer of this kind of thought; he can only repeat it once he is prepared to receive it, once he is “pre-adapted to become its host.” The re-enactment of the past (the

52. Collingwood believed that ideas and artistic creations should not be copyrighted, because they were intrinsically “social” creations; in this context, he wrote, “la propriété c’est le vol.” See *The Principles of Art* (Oxford, 1938), 325–326.

“essence” of history) in this context is not a “relation” between independent historical actors and the historian. “Thought” defines all these individuals, and binds them together into a larger, non-temporal network. Every act (of thought, of understanding) “is more than a mere individual; it is something having a universal character” (*IH* 309). This is why Collingwood emphatically rejected biography as a possible subject of history. “Through this framework—the bodily life of man, with his childhood, maturity and senescence, his diseases and all the accidents of animal existence—the tides of thought, his own and others’, flow crosswise, regardless of its structure, like sea-water through a stranded wreck” (*IH* 304). The historian is intercepting this perpetual flow of thought. The repetition that is re-enactment is only possible because each act of thought in the past was already a repetition of something which persists outside of all its concrete manifestations. Thought is something that “genuinely recurs” but to resurrect it through re-enactment, there must be a kind of switch into another “dimension.”⁵³

Collingwood was working on this peculiar idea of individuality and identity early in his career. In his first book, *Religion and Philosophy*, for example, he suggested that truth could be shared and repeated in much the same way as “thought” in *The Idea of History*.

The spirit of truth is not circumscribed by the limits of space and time. If a real community of life is possible between two men who share each other’s outward presence and inward thoughts, it is possible no less between two who have never met. . . . The earlier in point of time lives on in the life of the later, *each* deriving the benefit from such intercourse. . . . Thus there is a certain spiritual intercourse between men who have no outward point of contact whatever.⁵⁴

Here we have the same reverse sequence found in *The Idea of History*; spiritual or psychical identity is prior to temporality. As early as 1915 Collingwood was articulating what this would mean for historical practice, writing that “the good historian is one whose eye for the underlying identity is sure, who can recognize the same thought as it comes up in different forms under the different hands that have remodelled it.”⁵⁵ This thought would be the mark of a spiritual continuity, the communion of mind across time and space. In *Speculum Mentis* (1924), Collingwood’s first mature work, thought was described in much the same way as in the later lectures on re-enactment. “All concrete thought is in its immediacy temporal, but in its mediation extra-temporal.”⁵⁶ The key question, of course, was identifying the location of this mediation (something quite noticeably left aside in *The Idea of History*). What could “reconcile” concrete individual thoughts across time and space?

53. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*, 159; and *An Autobiography*, 113.

54. Collingwood, *Religion and Philosophy* (London, 1916), 160–161; my italics.

55. Collingwood, “Truth and Contradiction,” Dep 16, 10. This is the only surviving, second chapter of a lost book manuscript of the same title; see Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 42–43. This idea of transformation appears in Collingwood’s translation of Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (London, 1913), 237: “in reality ideas are nothing but the unremitting thought of man, and transmission for them is nothing less than transformation.”

56. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis, or, the Map of Knowledge* (Oxford, 1924), 301.

At this earlier stage of his career, Collingwood was appealing to such idealist notions as the “absolute mind,” a kind of Gentilian “concrete universal” that somehow replicated itself in the very process of history.⁵⁷ In *Religion and Philosophy*, this identity was more explicitly linked to a divine source; the truth that appeared “under infinitely various aspects” was the truth of God as mediated by Christ’s appearance.⁵⁸ This theological, “idealist” attempt to reconcile the concrete and the “universal” in history is exactly what Collingwood is said to have abandoned in his later work, as he moved to a more radical historicist position, where there was no real universal binding the temporal fragments together.

This takes us to the heart of Collingwood’s alleged “inconsistency,” for in late works like *An Essay on Metaphysics* and *An Autobiography*, he was supposedly saying rather clearly that there was no real historical continuity, no transcendent truths, only historically specific thought systems that had to be penetrated by recreating the past logic of question and answer. This process would lead to the fundamental concepts (the “absolute presuppositions”) which grounded these systems and could not themselves be questioned. So even if Collingwood believed thought was repeatable, still he seemed to have given up on any idea of continuity, at least in the spiritual or metaphysical sense, in these texts. At the same time, Collingwood never at any point in his career really believed in the kind of metaphysical or transcendent identity which could be traced *in abstraction*, outside of the different embodiments it took on in history. His later emphasis on these historical differences is not necessarily a rejection of some underlying identity.⁵⁹ Like Heidegger’s turn in the 1930s, which saw him set aside questions concerning the ontology of Being in order to focus on its historical disclosures, Collingwood became interested in tracing the historical specificity of metaphysical questions, and he did not look for any ultimate “truths.” Heidegger, like Collingwood, was claiming in the 1930s that metaphysical questions were “historical through and through,”⁶⁰ but *historical* did not imply historicism of any sort. This was because transcendence (however it was

57. *Ibid.*, 289. Collingwood was greatly influenced by Giovanni Gentile’s work (like his *Theory of Mind as Pure Act*), but in *An Autobiography* Collingwood disowned the Italian philosopher, who became a fascist. On Collingwood and Gentile, see H. S. Harris, “Introduction,” to Gentile, *Genesis and Structure of Society* (Urbana, Ill., 1960), esp. 14–20.

58. Collingwood, *Religion and Philosophy*, 106.

59. As Errol E. Harris writes, in the book on metaphysics Collingwood “keeps these ultimate truths in the background,” and the historicism is only an “appearance.” See “Collingwood’s Treatment of the Ontological Argument and the Categorical Universal,” in Krausz, ed., *Critical Essays*, 133. In a letter to Guido de Ruggiero dated 9 January 1931, Collingwood criticized the nineteenth-century idealists (and their successors at Oxford) for not being “historically minded.” See Boucher, *Social and Political Philosophy*, 12.

60. See Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, transl. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, 1959). Heidegger’s early work on history parallels some of Collingwood’s early ideas. In his 1915 dissertation, for example, Heidegger wrote: “The living spirit is *essentially* an *historical* spirit. . . . The spirit is only conceivable when the complete plenitude of its accomplishments, i.e., its *history*, is incorporated within it. With this continually growing plenitude in its philosophical articulation, an ever increasing means is given toward the living apprehension of the absolute spirit of God.” Quoted and translated by Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Martin Heidegger and the Problem*

conceived) was only revealed in its projection through history, an idea Walter Benjamin, for example, was also exploring in this period.⁶¹ The “historical” was still timeless, in that it was not *limited* by its specific place: there was always a sense of otherness, which could be grasped through the process of repetition, whether this meant probing the early origins of thinking for the “unthought” (Heidegger), blasting the historical object out of the past into the present (Benjamin), or re-enacting past thought in the present transformed context (Collingwood).

Collingwood’s most “relativist” text was *An Essay on Metaphysics*, which introduced his theory of “absolute presuppositions,” the inherently unverifiable foundations of any historical epoch’s conceptual system. There was no “impartial standpoint” from which these foundations might be questioned.⁶² This text also suggests that these historically discontinuous forms of thought might conceal a hidden identity, as Collingwood discussed in some of his earlier work. In a highly suggestive comment on these groundless presuppositions of thought, the “absolute presuppositions” which seemed to have replaced any idea of “absolute mind,” Collingwood — who was incidentally a perceptive reader of Freud — notes that “there is something a little uncanny about absolute presuppositions. They give people more than a touch of the feeling which Rudolf Otto called numinous terror.”⁶³ In cryptic allusions Collingwood seemed to have been suggesting that there *was* something behind these radically relative presuppositions.

Freud, in his 1919 essay “The ‘Uncanny,’” quotes Schelling: “*Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light.”⁶⁴ What is it about our absolute presuppositions that ought to remain secret? Perhaps it was not merely their groundlessness; as Freud argued, the uncanny is whatever reminds us of the inner compulsion to *repeat*.⁶⁵ The uncanny, as Freud interpreted it, is an awareness that a manifest repetition reveals to us a more basic force that lies behind the particular repetitions. This more basic force, quite obviously, could never be known, or at least could never be directly observed. The “origin” could not be discovered, only continuously repeated.⁶⁶ This same repetition structure is, interestingly enough,

of Historical Meaning (Dordrecht, 1988), 120–121. See also John van Buren, *The Young Heidegger: Rumor of the Hidden King* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994).

61. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (1923) and “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969); Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, transl. John Osborne (London, 1977); and Benjamin, “N [Theoretics of knowledge; theory of progress],” from the Arcades Project, transl. Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth, *Philosophical Forum* 15 (Fall/Winter 1983–1984), 1–39. On this idea of projection, see Charles Rosen, “The Ruins of Walter Benjamin,” in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Reflections*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 137.

62. See Stephen Toulmin, *Human Understanding* (Oxford, 1972), I, 66.

63. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1940), 46.

64. Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works*, transl. James Strachey *et al.*, 24 vols. (London, 1953–), XVII, 224.

65. *Ibid.*, XVII, 238.

66. See Neil Hertz, “Freud and the Sandman,” in *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York, 1985), 97–121.

apparent in Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*, which Collingwood is alluding to here. Otto was seeking the essential origin of religious experience within the historically repeated (and varied) actual experiences of the sacred. The "numinous" is, for Otto, something invisible, preconceptual, brought to light only when it is articulated within a context of more concrete experiences and feelings.⁶⁷ The terror we feel (the dread of the uncanny), is due to the powerful "non-present" presence of this sacred other.⁶⁸ Collingwood, then, while limiting himself to the historical specificity of conceptual systems and their absolute presuppositions, probably allowed for the continuing, invisible presence of something within these historically discontinuous thoughts.⁶⁹ As Freud and Otto also indicated, each in his own way, such a presence, by definition, cannot be abstracted from the particular context in which it has been embedded. As Collingwood wrote in *Religion and Philosophy*: "However much we try to remove all context from a thing, we can do no more than to invest it with a different context."⁷⁰ "Truth" may be eternal, but it always takes on new forms as it is "clothed" in each particular historical context. As early as 1924, Collingwood was criticizing religion as a "formal error" for "mythologizing" these particular realities, translating the elusive presence of the divine into some kind of tangible *representation*.⁷¹ In this context, Collingwood's emphasis on historical discontinuity (and a reluctance to speak about ultimate truths or pure being) did not necessarily signal that he had adopted a "historicist" position in the *Essay on Metaphysics*. Yet, this invisible continuity was hardly apparent here either. This difficult question of the idea of a transcendent "non-present" presence in history was not unique to Collingwood but was part of a larger context of thought his ideas were refracting.

67. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, transl. John W. Harvey (Oxford, 1926), 28–30. Otto compares the numinous with the concept of the uncanny (in Sophocles), on 40–41.

68. On Freud and Otto (who seemed to have been unaware of each other's work, at least in this context) see Lynn Poland, "The Idea of the Holy and the History of the Sublime," *Journal of Religion* 72 (April 1992), 175–197. Poland discusses the relation between the uncanny and *The Idea of the Holy* on 186, 188.

69. For example, Collingwood, in a letter to Gilbert Ryle dated 9 May 1935, rejected the idea that a "universal" is just an abstract construction, writing "I am disposed to think that what makes a number of things instances of the same class is their common possession of some common nature. . . . 'the universal X-ness exists and is instanced in various x's,'" which meant one particular version of the universal was enough proof of its existence. At the same time, Collingwood asserted that the only kind of thinking that could really "assert or deny particular matters of fact" was *historical* thinking (Dep 22, 27–28, 4). In an essay in a book reviewed by Collingwood in 1937, Theodor Litt discussed this structure in history, arguing that universal concepts "by no means achieve their content by revealing what is 'common' in a multiplicity of phenomena; they rather bring to expression a universality, resting on itself and providing its own ground, that can be grasped, if we look in the right place, for and in every 'particular' of the spiritual world." See Litt, "The Universal in the Structure of Historical Knowledge," in *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and H. J. Paton (Oxford, 1936), 135. Reviewed by Collingwood in *English Historical Review* 52 (1937), 141–146.

70. Collingwood, *Religion and Philosophy*, 111.

71. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, 153.

III

“The meta-historical breaks through and enters the historical world. There is no absolute breach between these two spheres. But when meta-history enters into history, not only is it revealed in history but it is also adapted to the limitation of historical time and historical place. Light shines in the darkness. The infinite God speaks with a finite human tongue within the limited conditions of a certain period and a certain nation. Revelation is always concealment also. . . .”
 — Berdyaev

The emergence of “historicism” was one of the key theological issues for early twentieth-century Christianity. The awareness of historical variation characteristic of nineteenth-century European thought inevitably provoked a crisis of faith for a religion that believed itself *founded* on a unique historical fact. Rudolf Bultmann explained how historical practice might serve to question this foundation: “The science of history becomes a crisis for belief only by virtue of this stumbling block—that the word of the Christian message asserts that it is the authentic Word of God; because man would like to verify the unverifiable assertion, and demands to have criteria, where in the very nature of the matter there can be none.”⁷² Christianity had always been distinguished from Judaism and Islam by its historicity, which by the end of the nineteenth century was a serious difficulty which “haunted the theologians” in Britain and elsewhere.⁷³ Critical history, introduced by figures such as Ernst Troeltsch, investigated the particular historical origins of Christianity, and in the process deprived it of absolute certainty and finality, revealing it to be a contextualized phenomenon. Although this was in a sense liberating, in that orthodox literalness could be replaced by more self-conscious “interpretation” of doctrine and Scripture (miracles, for example, could be explained naturalistically or ignored altogether,⁷⁴ and biblical texts could be understood according to their particular functions in different cultural contexts⁷⁵) this kind of historicizing inevitably tended to relativize even the central features of Christianity, by integrating them into their own particular contexts. A book like Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (translated in 1910), which depicted Christ and the early Church as immersed in a radically foreign, entirely outmoded intellectual and cultural context, questioned the contemporary relevance of his teaching altogether. Theology could no longer simply interpret texts and events accepted as authentic, but rather had to answer the question posed by their essential historicity: whether the Christian tradition was a mere historical construction,

72. Bultmann, “The Crisis in Belief” (1931), in *Essays Philosophical and Theological*, transl. James C. G. Greig (London, 1955), 18–19.

73. Peter Hinchliff, *God and History: Aspects of British Theology, 1875–1914* (Oxford, 1992), 8.

74. See, for example, the work of H. E. G. Paulus and Bishop Colenso, as described in Hinchliff, *God and History*, 23, 28–30.

75. In Britain, this would come to be known as “form criticism,” which developed from the work of scholars such as Herman Gunkel (1862–1932), who researched the “situation of life” of the biblical texts, not their original “sources.”

or, as Von Harnack said, there was something “which under differing historical forms is of permanent validity.”⁷⁶

Preserving the eternal *in* history was one of the objectives of late nineteenth-century attempts to elaborate an idealist, Hegelian, sometimes even evolutionary philosophy that allowed for an immanent divinity in a world of concrete historical change.⁷⁷ The so-called New Theology of R. J. Campbell in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century was a controversial version of this idea, in which God is ultimately identified as the “Absolute” of idealist philosophy.⁷⁸ However, the difficulty with these attempts to rediscover a Christianity for the modern world was their inability to give it any concrete *historical* foundations. Not only did these idealist, sometimes even pantheist doctrines transcend everyday human concerns, they also had trouble describing and interpreting the historical uniqueness of key Christian events, most notably the very appearance of Christ.⁷⁹ Early twentieth-century theology had to confront the problem of integrating historicity and the divine in this particular way.

While Karl Barth’s “crisis theology” affirmed the radical alterity of God, theological writers like Rudolf Otto in Germany and John Oman in Britain were working on a “phenomenology” of the religious experience as a way of mediating the concrete individual with the divinity, an approach further developed in *Foundations*, a seminal volume of essays edited by B. H. Streeter and published in Britain in 1912. In these essays the individual religious experience was related both to the divine and the historical *context* of particular Christian communities. This kind of mediation allowed for a “progressive revelation” in history, expressed in distinct cultural settings and the individuals within them. Streeter was a typical figure of this period, whose interests included the relation between science and theology, comparative religion, and biblical source criticism, and the theology he and like-minded theologians advocated mediated “truths” and their ongoing historical expressions. One consequence of such thinking was a shift of interest from the authentic, timeless Word toward the Word as it appears in specific historical forms. As William Sanday wrote in 1915: “There are great truths about God and Christ which are permanent and unchangeable. And yet, the forms under which we conceive of them must of necessity change, with the changing apparatus of thought through which they

76. Von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (London, 1901), quoted in Hinchliff, 24.

77. In the work of, for example, the British philosophers T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet, E. Caird, and F. H. Bradley. See Patrick, *Magdalen Metaphysicals*, chapter 1, “Edwardian Idealism,” and Thomas A. Langford, *In Search of Foundations: English Theology, 1900–1920* (Nashville, 1969), chapter 3, “Idealism, Theology, and Challenge.”

78. R. J. Campbell, *The New Theology* (London, 1907), and Campbell, *The New Theology Sermons* (London, 1907). On Campbell and the controversy over this doctrine in Britain, see Keith W. Clements, *Lovers of Discord: Twentieth Century Theological Controversies in England* (London, 1988), chapter 2, and Hinchliff, *God and History*, 198–222.

79. For a discussion of this problem in the context of Christological debates in early twentieth-century Britain, see Langford, *In Search of Foundations*, chapters 8–9, and Clements, *Lovers of Discord*, chapter 4.

find expression.”⁸⁰ This kind of theological approach led to the idea that even the appearance of Christ could be contextualized without becoming merely *historical*. If his actions were God’s perfect will, nonetheless they were conditioned by their appearance in a particular human being and in a specific historical context, and therefore these actions had to be reinterpreted and essentially *transformed* for every new community. There was no one original Christ for all time who would extinguish the historical person of Jesus.⁸¹ Christ made his appearance *as* this historically conditioned figure. Streeter, for example, actually welcomed Schweitzer’s research because it provided a concrete foundation for interpreting Christ; *a priori* ideas of divinity inevitably caused confusion, he thought, and often led to distorted readings of the original texts.⁸² Theology was not to work against history from the position of abstract philosophical categories, extracting the truth from the myths of the past, but work at rediscovering the truth inherent in past historical contexts. This rediscovery would always be a process of repetition, not reconstruction, even at the more abstract conceptual level. As one contributor to the *Foundations* volume put it: “From St. Paul and the writer of the Fourth Gospel to the framers of the ecumenical creeds, Christian theology was formulated in the language, and in some relation to the problems, of the philosophy of the time.”⁸³ This was the present task: not a search for originary “authenticity” but an identification and translation of the problems into new forms, or contexts, of thought. This is exactly what Collingwood’s first book *Religion and Philosophy* was trying to do: reconfigure Christianity in light of recent philosophical ideas.⁸⁴ This is not surprising, since Collingwood was part of Streeter’s theological circle, publishing his first article on “The Devil” in a collection of essays in the *Foundations* tradition, and it is likely that Streeter was responsible for publishing Collingwood’s book at Macmillan.⁸⁵ Collingwood would continue to be involved in what came to be

80. Quoted in Mark D. Chapman, “The Socratic Subversion of Tradition: William Sanday and Theology, 1900–1920,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 45 (April 1994), 110.

81. See for example P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ: The Congregational Union Lecture for 1909* (London, 1909), 345.

82. B. H. Streeter, “The Historic Christ,” in *Foundations: A Statement of Christian Belief in Terms of Modern Thought, by Seven Oxford Men*, ed. Streeter (London, 1912).

83. W. H. Moberly, “God and the Absolute,” in Streeter, ed., *Foundations*, 427.

84. As he wrote in his preface: “Every modern philosophy has found in Christianity, consciously or unconsciously, the touchstone by which to test its powers of explanation. And conversely, Christian theology has always required the help of current philosophy in stating and expounding its doctrines.” *Religion and Philosophy*, xiii. Reviews of this book placed it squarely in the theological context, comparing Collingwood to, for example, William Temple, Oliver Chase Quick, and W. Tudor Jones; see T. S. Eliot, review of *Religion and Philosophy*, in *International Journal of Ethics* 27 (1917), 543, and review of William Temple, *Mens Creatrix*, *ibid.*, 542–543; James Moffat, “Survey of Recent Theological Literature,” *Hibbert Journal* 15 (1917), 677–678. Collingwood would go on to write in *Speculum Mentis* that the book was not meant to be a “new revelation” but an attempt “to say once more, in words suited to our generation, something that everybody has always known” (36).

85. Collingwood, “The Devil,” in B. H. Streeter *et al.*, *Concerning Prayer: Its Nature, its Difficulties and its Value* (London, 1916). Streeter and William Temple were the theological consultants for Macmillan at the time Collingwood’s book was published. See Charles Morgan, *The House of Macmillan (1843–1943)* (London, 1943), 212.

called the "Group," a theological discussion group at Oxford which included Streeter, Clement Webb, W. H. Moberly, and Ronald Knox.⁸⁶

Although there is no question Collingwood remained interested in overtly theological issues throughout his career,⁸⁷ it is often assumed that his important thinking became increasingly secularized, as he placed more and more emphasis on the concrete forms of human activity and the highly contextualized nature of understanding. Yet, as I have suggested, his analysis of the historically concrete need not *preclude* an interest in transcendent identity. In *Speculum Mentis* Collingwood rejected "religion" as myth, but praised the religious *insight* as crucial for understanding human history, "because it liberates the soul . . . and leads from the things that are seen and temporal to the things that are unseen and eternal."⁸⁸ This is the conceptual relation that can be followed in Collingwood's entire work: the relation between particular forms of human life and the "invisible" identity which preserves their continuity within these historical repetitions. However varied the context in which he was working, Collingwood's language was consistently and systematically instrumental: human action was seen to be performing a function by expressing something itself quite intangible. The artist, though working individually, is involved in a process of collaboration, in fact is the spokesman for the community, voicing the "secrets" it cannot itself express; the philosopher is described as the "organ" of the corporate consciousness, "called" to give expression to society's self-criticism; the church is the "living embodiment" of the Holy Spirit; the state is an "incarnation" of the sovereignty of political action; the historian is a "monad," a mirror in which the past is expressed in concentrated form; individuality is a "vehicle" of thought; tradition is a "force" that does not depend on conscious memory for its transmission; duty is an "atonement," a concrete, individual act that manifests the universal good in time.⁸⁹ Each embodiment expresses something "invisible" which makes itself known only through these concrete expressions.

Collingwood wrote in *The New Leviathan* that the "birth of love is the act of *limiting your demands*: substituting for the quest of absolute satisfaction (the demand for omnipotence) the quest of many partial or incomplete satisfactions," while noting that Christianity is the "historical form" of a religion of unsatisfied love, "where the not-self on which the lover fixes his affections is not accessibly lodged in the world . . . but utterly and fatally 'transcendent.'"⁹⁰

86. See Patrick, *Magdalen Metaphysicals*, xxvi-vii.

87. See *ibid.*, chapter 4, and Lionel Rubinoff, "Religion and the Rapprochement between Thought and Action," in Krausz, ed., *Critical Studies*, 79-112.

88. Collingwood, *Speculum Mentis*, 153.

89. Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, ch. 14; *The First Mate's Log of a Voyage to Greece in the Schooner 'Fleur de Lys' in 1939* (Oxford, 1939), 63; "The Church," Dep 1, 20; "Political Action," in *Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Boucher (Oxford, 1989), 109; "The Nature and Aims of a Philosophy of History," in *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, ed. William Debbins (Austin, Texas, 1965), 54ff.; *The Idea of History*, 303; Collingwood and J. N. L. Myres, *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (Oxford, 1934), 252; Collingwood, *The New Leviathan: or, Man, Society, Civilization and Barbarism* (Oxford, 1942), chapter 17.

90. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, §§ 8.57-58, 8.38-39.

The historical forms of activity Collingwood described might, then, have been limited ways of reaching this transcendent “not-self.”

IV

“If the Divine becomes known in our lives as the power of conquering death, it is something that can only happen to us in this or that particular moment of time; it is only known as an *event*, never as an essence or a thing. And it can happen to us only in the midst of living, *after* death in some form. . . .” —Rosenstock-Huessy

Collingwood’s “historicism” was not necessarily inconsistent with his more transcendental, even mystical ideas, once we realize that the historically specific form is marked by the presence of something invisible, a force which has no tangible or even “abstract” structure. This concept is critical for understanding Collingwood’s idea of history. Though it often goes unremarked, the opening historiographical narrative of *The Idea of History* includes the Christian conception of God as one of the “profound revolutions” in the study of history. In this conceptual revolution, individual actors themselves, not simply their actions, are considered vehicles of God’s purpose, and therefore historically important; this concept, Collingwood goes on to explain, prepared the idea that *all* historical forms are transient entities which appear in history to serve a “definite function.” Collingwood thought this was a major step, “because the recognition that the historical process creates its own vehicles, so that entities like Rome and England are not the presuppositions but the *products* [my italics] of that process, is the first step towards grasping the peculiar characteristics of history” (*IH* 48). This peculiarity, already encountered in a more elusive form in the re-enactment doctrine, is the idea that history is not a procession of discrete events to be reconstructed, but an ongoing series of transformations that express an invisible, transcendent force. If there was identity between different thoughts in history, there was also a certain kind of identity between other kinds of historical structures. This early Christian “revolution” in historical understanding, then, informs Collingwood’s own “spiritual” analysis of civilization and progress. “In history,” he wrote in a 1927 essay on historical cycles, “*tout lasse, tout passe, tout casse*; everything decays, and all movement is a movement away from something, a loss of something won, a withering, a death.” Each new form of life heralds the death of a previous “vehicle.” Every century, then, is always a “century of decline” in some way. As Collingwood writes, it may appear as if “European civilization, expressing itself as it does through these various organs, has been dying by inches for an unconscionable time.” However, “this dying by inches is merely a synonym for life; when archer, or counterpoint, or the full-bottomed wig, shows symptoms of decay, that merely proves that the spirit of man is no longer in it; it is not here, it is risen; it has passed into another vehicle, and the mourners who bewail its death are

all unaware that it is recreating itself in a new form beneath their very eyes.”⁹¹ The continuity of history could not be discerned in the outward forms of life; it weaved its way through concrete cultural (and biological) realities.⁹²

Working within history, the historian is obviously implicated in these cyclical crises of order, as new vehicles of history are emerging to replace empty and decaying ones. As Collingwood once commented, the questions to be answered by historians are not merely academic: “the historian does not raise problems at haphazard in this way; they raise themselves,”⁹³ which meant that the historian must in one sense enter the forces of history. This was an idea developed in the lectures on history. Collingwood’s detective story in *The Idea of History* (IH 266–274) (a condensation of Agatha Christie’s *Murder at the Vicarage* [1930])⁹⁴ is not just an epistemological allegory: the task of the detective reveals a more complex structure of crisis, intervention, and order. The murder marks the revelation of crisis, but significantly for the detective the event itself can never be observed directly, nor can he accept direct testimony as a substitute: the crime has left only traces and effects. The order of the community has been disrupted and must be restored by working through these aftereffects. By constructing an imaginary picture of what might have occurred, the detective is able to search out *specific* clues which would clarify this picture; the detective looks to prepare the ground for a certain kind of inspiration. The clues unearthed by this method, however, never really add up to prove the guilt of the criminal: this picture is not in the end “verified.” The effect of his work is rather to provoke a repetition of the “crime” itself. As Collingwood explains, after the detective assembles his evidence and ventures a theory, the criminal, it is hoped, is forced to reappear in some form: he makes a confession, commits suicide, or in some cases attempts another crime to erase the original one. The point is that the work of the detective makes controlling this new violence possible. The model of research presented here is thus not a static one. There is no return to order following the solution of the crime, no repair of the

91. Collingwood, “The Theory of Cycles,” in *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, 81. Similar images of death and progress can be found in Collingwood, *Ruskin’s Philosophy: an Address Delivered at the Ruskin Centenary Conference, Coniston, August 8, 1919* (Kendal, 1922), 38–39, and *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (London, 1925), 99–101. These texts are both reprinted in Collingwood, *Essays in the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Alan Donagan (Bloomington, Ind., 1964).

92. This idea lies behind Collingwood’s chilling commentary on the Jews in Germany. He wrote that there is no such thing as a biological history, and ancient Jewish thought made the error of confusing the “genuine” historical fact (the mission of the Jews as the chosen people) and the mere biological continuity of bloodlines. “Modern Germany thus stands officially committed to the same error which infected ancient Jewish thought, & which Paul exploded—the error of regarding a given community’s historical function as bound up with its biological character . . . —and thus persecutes the Jews *because it agrees with them*. Intellectually, the Jew is the victor in the present-day conflict (if you can call it that) in Germany. He has succeeded in imposing his idea of a chosen people (in the biological sense of the word people) on modern Germany & this may explain why the victims of this persecution take it so calmly.” Collingwood, “Notebooks on Historiography. Notebook XI 1938–1939,” Dep 13, 6–9.

93. Collingwood, “Lectures on the Philosophy of History” (1926), Dep 14, 54.

94. On the links between Collingwood’s story and Christie’s novel, see Joseph M. Levine, “The Autonomy of History: R. G. Collingwood and Agatha Christie,” *Clio* 7 (1978), 353–364.

fissure. In fact, in this whole process of “solving” the mystery, the relationships previously hidden below the surface in the community — blackmail, illegitimacy, jealousy — relationships revealed by the work of the detective in the course of investigation (since they in fact contributed to the original crisis) cannot now be fully repressed, and therefore must be dealt with. The work, in other words, must continue in this new situation if a crisis is to be averted in the future. The history looks to the past to prepare for the future.

Collingwood always emphasized that historical work is not so much an attempt to observe passively the spectacle of past events of humanity, as it is an admittedly violent intervention into the past in order to perform a task in the present. While he wrote (in this section discussing the detective) that the problems history addresses are never quite so urgent as criminal disruptions, it is clear especially in later writings such as *The New Leviathan* that Collingwood believed history to be responsible for finding solutions to the critical problems faced by civilization. Nevertheless, this did not mean that historical research ought to be focused on “relevant” issues. Collingwood was seeking to redefine the idea of history as something intimately bound up with present and past experience.

This problem turns out to be yet another version of Collingwood’s dialectic, the spiralling scale of forms, where the new “form” cuts through contradiction while preserving previous attempts to confront this crisis.⁹⁵ The danger, Collingwood would stress, lies in not confronting the often “secret” history leading up to this moment of crisis. Rejecting outright whatever inspired the old orders, and inventing a new one altogether, would continue this repression, leading to disastrous, even violent results.⁹⁶ This was not the way to face the crisis. Collingwood analyzed what he saw as the death or breakdown of European civilization in this context: what was urgently needed, he thought, were new forms to preserve the continuity of the Western tradition, now that the old forms of life were no longer valid.⁹⁷ The immediate danger was that fascism was offering to resurrect empty relics of archaic forms as compensation, unleashing destructive pagan forces.⁹⁸ So Collingwood’s idea of progress, sketched at the

95. This dialectic can be traced in Collingwood’s recently rediscovered “lost” manuscript, *Libellus de Generatione: An Essay in Absolute Empiricism* (1919), a kind of Crocean dialectic of truth and error written for Guido de Ruggiero (Dep 28). This dialectic also appears in, for example, Collingwood’s essay “The Breakdown of Liberalism” (n.d.), Dep 24, but is developed most clearly in his theory of the “scale of forms” in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, and in a political form in *The New Leviathan*. On Collingwood’s dialectic thought, see especially Mink, *Mind, History, and Dialectic*.

96. See Collingwood, “[Fragments folklore manuscript],” Dep 21, Section F, 4.

97. See Collingwood, “Man Goes Mad” (1936), Dep 24.

98. See Collingwood, “Fascism and Nazism,” in *Essays in Political Philosophy*. Peter Drucker (cited by Collingwood in this essay) explained the problem in this way: “The old order has ceased to have validity and reality, and its world has therefore become irrational and demonic. But there has emerged no new order which would have brought a new basis of belief, and from which we could develop new forms and new institutions to organize social reality so as to enable us to attain a new supreme goal.” *The End of Economic Man: A Study of the New Totalitarianism* (New York, 1939), 82. Unfortunately, Collingwood did not live to complete the most important section of *The New Leviathan*, the last part where he planned to outline what civilization must do to counter barbarism in the world; see Boucher, *Social and Political Philosophy*, 68–69.

end of *The Idea of History*, had important political dimensions. There (commenting on two current crises) he wrote: "To solve the problem of war or of divorce is only possible by devising new institutions which shall recognize in full the moral claims recognized by the State or by monogamy, and shall satisfy these claims without leaving unsatisfied the further claims to which, in historical fact, the old institutions have given rise" (331). The solution was to reintroduce continuity in the midst of historical dissolution. When Collingwood wrote that we studied the past only "to see more clearly into the situation in which we are called upon to act,"⁹⁹ the historian, like the detective, investigated the causes which led to the current problem that needed a solution, an essential task since the forces which led to this breakdown must be incorporated into the new solution. Yet this solution was not itself a historical one. As Collingwood said, historical work could never predict the future, even as it prepared its foundations. The decisive act was intrinsically ahistorical for Collingwood, despite the fact that this decision could only be responsibly made once the historical analysis of the precipitating event was worked out.

V

"The want of God and of the sacred is absence. But absence is not nothing. It is directly the presence of the hidden fullness of what has been, which is yet to be assimilated. As such it gathers the essential: the sacred in Greek antiquity, in the prophetic-Judaic, in the Gospel of Jesus. This no-longer is in itself a not-yet of the hidden advent of its inexhaustible essence."
—Heidegger

Collingwood's theory of action is the context which relates history (as a dialectic of forms), historical practice, and, I will suggest, the spiritual idea of re-enactment. Action, Collingwood explained, was not confined by the historical situation because, as we have seen, the tangible vehicles of history created by past action were inevitably imperfect and hence *mortal* incarnations. In an important sense, authentic action had to transcend the historical forms of life. In his first published essay, Collingwood remarked: "It is a duty, indeed it is the spring of all moral advance, to criticize current standards of morality and to ask whether this may not be a case where the current rule fails to apply."¹⁰⁰ Duty, discharged by an exceptional act, is a compelling force which breaks through the historical situation; it is an individual obligation that cannot be specified, or predicted, or subsumed under general laws, as Collingwood explained in his last book, *The New Leviathan*. In a draft version of this text he wrote that the "act is as unique as the agent whose duty it is."¹⁰¹ That act has no precedent: "the goodness of a thing is the fact of it being chosen."¹⁰² Duty (like the absolute presupposition, the historical imagination, or even political

99. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, 114.

100. "The Devil" (1916), in *Faith and Reason*, 224.

101. Collingwood, "Draft Mss. for *The New Leviathan*," Dep 24, §17.43.

102. Collingwood, "Goodness, Rightness, Utility" (1939-1940), Dep 9, 35.

action) “is its own criterion.”¹⁰³ It is of the moment, unverifiable, yet it is not for that reason merely expedient.¹⁰⁴ The act is in history but related to a higher obligation that calls each individual at a particular time to fulfill his duty. However, this duty is not clearly indicated in advance. “All you get by considering what the word ‘duty’ means is a criterion by which it can be recognized and an assurance that there is only one thing to which it applies. You acquire no direct insight whereby that one thing can be unmistakably recognized. You are in no way protected against recognizing it wrong.”¹⁰⁵ As Collingwood wrote: “All action begins with an immediate, indemonstrable, and irresistible feeling that we are filled and sustained by some power as yet unexpressed, which is to reveal itself through our action; and thus action . . . begins in faith and rests on faith. . . .”¹⁰⁶ The act is not subsumed under laws or principles, but aims at expressing something “other.” The invisibility of this other makes every act a genuine risk.

This *instrumental* structure in Collingwood’s thought underlies his conception of authentic action and duty. The individual is acting in time as an agent of some transcendent force. If the “goodness of an action is simply our decision to do it,” then clearly our decisions must be linked to a higher moral order of some kind that would legitimize them. This structure is clearly evident in Collingwood’s lectures on moral philosophy, where the ultimate authority is the divine. God, he wrote in 1926, is “not an object of man’s thought but a life incarnate in man himself.” The incarnation reveals to man how “he can become God, can be what he ought to be.”¹⁰⁷ The moral life of man, then, is not an attempt to achieve some abstract standard, but in fact “the life of the divine spirit in man,” an effort to identify and express this spirit adequately.¹⁰⁸ This is why our moral acts are so unique, so unprecedented, perhaps even “illegal.” There is no timeless standard which can arbitrate individual acts. “The good will is no abstraction,” Collingwood wrote, “it wills always something definite and individual; that is, its infinite essence realises itself through the existence of finite actions.”¹⁰⁹ These finite human actions therefore parallel divine action, which has no presuppositions, no determinations limiting its expression. “Hence all things are God not in the pantheistic sense that every empirical fact is as such equally divine, but in the sense that their empirical determinations are illusions which when removed give place to a true recognition of the fundamental divinity of them all, that is to say, their ultimate nature as pure activity.”¹¹⁰ Although at this point “history” seems to have retreated

103. Collingwood, “Moral Philosophy Lectures” (1929, rev. 1932), Dep 10, 137. Cf. Collingwood, *An Essay on Metaphysics*; his “Inaugural 1935 Rough Notes,” Dep 13, 46; and the essay “Political Action,” 96–98.

104. Collingwood, “Draft mss. for *The New Leviathan*,” §28.9.

105. *Ibid.*, §17.60

106. Collingwood, “Reason is Faith Cultivating Itself,” in *Faith and Reason*, 119.

107. Collingwood, “Action” (1923), Dep 3, 11.

108. *Ibid.*, 37.

109. Collingwood, “Lectures on Moral Philosophy” (1933), Dep 8, 124.

110. *Ibid.*, 75.

from the cosmic stage, in fact the concrete “empirical determinations,” the finite historical actions, were crucially important for Collingwood. The divine would never be discovered in itself, unmediated.

Immersed in the empirical world, it was impossible for finite beings to strip away these “illusions” and reveal pure spirit. It was only through the tangible determinations that the mind gained any insight at all into this divine spirit.¹¹¹ To explain how this insight was possible, Collingwood would describe how the “spirit” that gives life and continuity to history was in fact *mediated* by the individual mind. Spirit could not be observed as an object, since it incarnated itself within our own “thoughts.” This complex relation, described in Collingwood’s extremely dense notebooks on metaphysics from the 1930s, defined the way human action could be identified with a transcendent identity. Collingwood wrote that “the *nisus* which is *in* us in the form of conscious & free will is only one specialized form of a *nisus* operating throughout the universe, and we are so to speak the deputed agents of all existence, appointed for the purpose of realising spirit.”¹¹² So as Collingwood hinted in *The Idea of History*, the individual appears in history as a vehicle, the “agent” of a kind of “cosmic effort” to bring spirit into the world.¹¹³ Spirit could only be known to us as it was embodied in thought, localized in space and time, within the mind, though spirit was itself always trying to overcome all “outwardness” in its movement in history.

Collingwood (like Heidegger) warned against mythologizing pure Being, the God of pure activity, since it is by its very nature inaccessible to direct human perception. This is the reason why Collingwood focused on thought as the essence of historical understanding, for it is within the highest forms of thought, he believed, that the individual manifests the authentic relation to the divine. “Thought,” he writes, “is thus the revelation to the mind of God in his transcendence, by the self-reproduction of God (without forfeiting this transcendence) in the mind.”¹¹⁴ Thought in this temporal world is therefore always from the start a repetition: a repetition of God’s will in a unique historical context. At

111. Collingwood here echoes Heidegger, who in *Being and Time* wrote: “If historiology, which itself arises from authentic historicity, reveals by repetition the *Dasein* which has-been-there and reveals it in its possibility, then historiology has already made manifest the ‘universal’ in the once-for-all. . . . The theme of historiology is neither that which happened just once for all nor something universal which floats above it, but the possibility which has been factually existent.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London, 1962), 446. We can compare here Karl Jaspers, who wrote: “Not the course of time and events that has no beginning and no end is historic, but the fulfilled time whose appearance rounds out and brings to the present what has intrinsic being by a relation to its transcendence. . . . When Leopold van Ranke, the historian, wrote that each time relates to God and is not just a step for times to come, he only seemed to be saying the same thing. We must add that this direct relation to God does not exist as an image and is thus not visible to the historical observer. Only its *Existenz* can be felt by another *Existenz* whose own historicity makes it approach the past in communication.” Jaspers, *Philosophy* (1932), transl. E. B. Ashton, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1969), II, 113.

112. Collingwood, “Notes Toward a Metaphysic,” Book D, 70.

113. *Ibid.*, Book E, 22.

114. *Ibid.*, 25.

the same time, the individual cannot simply work backwards to rediscover this divinity as it exists outside of any context: it only reveals itself in the particular realities, within the repetitions that make up the historical process. "In the movement of history . . . the starting point of that movement (God) must be enriching or unfolding itself, and every new step in that process must be a permanent addition to the divine nature. Now these steps are not abstractions, i.e. not mere events, deeds, historical occurrences (*things that happen*) they are spirits, individual minds."¹¹⁵ This structure gives continuity to the historical process despite radical *discontinuities* in its formal organization. "Historical being triumphs over time in the sense that it *becomes eternal*: but it becomes eternal not in its actuality (as embodied form) for here, because embodied, it perishes: but in its ideality (as disembodied form)."¹¹⁶ Re-enactment, it would seem to follow, rediscovers this greater history because it seeks out prior manifestations of spirit in actual thought. The historical structure Collingwood elaborates makes re-enactment the only path to self-understanding in the widest sense: the understanding of the individual as expression of the divine truth. Re-enactment is also an important component of *decision*, for the study of past incarnations prepares the actor for a new breakthrough of truth in the exceptional act.¹¹⁷

As one note in the "symphony" of the infinite,¹¹⁸ each unique point in time, each decision, each repeatable thought, must be carefully preserved, as we move on toward the end of history. Violent abstraction could never reveal that infinite structure, nor was there a repeated pattern to be discerned somewhere.¹¹⁹ Genuine timelessness would be found in the concrete moments of history. That is why "the only clue to what man can do is what man has done" (*IH* 10). Collingwood's spiritual history was a way of linking the individual mind with the corporate history of mind—the tangible course of spirit in the world. This

115. *Ibid.*, Book B, 23–28.

116. Collingwood, "Notes on the History of Historiography & Philosophy of History (1936)," Dep 13, 17–18.

117. Rudolf Bultmann explored this connection in Collingwood's *The Idea of History*, noting, "for Collingwood self-knowledge includes the knowledge of the present situation with its heritage and its problems. But, must we not then say: self-knowledge is consciousness of responsibility over against the future? And the act of self-knowledge, is it not at the same time an act of decision? I do not think I am really contradicting Collingwood. For since, according to him, thought includes purpose or intention, then it follows that self-knowledge cannot be a mere theoretical act, but is also an act of decision." *History and Eschatology: The Gifford Lectures 1955* (Edinburgh, 1957), 136.

118. Collingwood, "Faith and Reason," in *Faith and Reason*, 143.

119. In a 1920 essay, Collingwood defended the existence of a chair in the philosophy of the Christian religion against objections that it would be an illogical hybrid of philosophical and empirical elements, precisely because it was a concrete philosophical subject. Here he concluded: "Modern philosophy, in earnest with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, believes in history: believes that history is worth making, because the Holy Spirit makes it, and worth remembering, because the Holy Spirit remembers it. . . . You get nearer the reality, so modern philosophy teaches, by taking it in its historical form than by abstracting from different parts of the historical form elements which look similar and putting them together." Collingwood, "The Philosophy of the Christian Religion," Sept. 29, 1920, Dep 1, 11.

was a spirit that not only had to be captured and repeated in a process of self-understanding, but revealed again in a new form in the moment of authentic action. Collingwood's spiritual approach to history, far from marginalizing his work, is what links him with an important movement in early twentieth-century thought.

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