

R.G. Collingwood in France : « un esprit curieux, un peu bizarre »

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Introduction

In an article entitled “Alasdair MacIntyre en France” published in 2013, the French philosopher Vincent Descombes wrote : “Since we are in France, a philosophy has to be understood regarding its political implications.”¹ The author reminded us of a necessary element for the historical understanding of philosophy : every philosophy imported in a foreign debate, has to answer questions asked by the host country, questions which are, most of the time, foreign to its own context of birth.

This is the case for the introduction of R.G. Collingwood’s thought in France. Thus, it is important to focus simultaneously on an historical approach by asking questions such as : who uses Collingwood’s philosophy? When and in which context? How many works of Collingwood’s are known, are they read by historian or by philosophers? And a philosophical approach: what are the questions which lead to the interest in Collingwood’s thought? In which debate Collingwood’s philosophy is discussed?

Both approaches, philosophical and historical, will necessarily drive us to examine the reason of this general characterisation of Collingwood’s philosophy by the historian Henri Marrou: “un esprit curieux, un peu bizarre”, “a peculiar mind, a bit weird”.² A statement which seems to have initiated a long tradition of Collingwood’s critics.

Why am I limiting my study only to the French reception and not to the French-speaking world in general? For one important reason, because Québec has a quite original status regarding Collingwoodian studies and a huge tradition since William Dray’s works until the recent articles by Matthieu Marion and Chinatsu Kobayashi of the University of Québec. However, academic research can’t only be understood within the scope of one nation, and many ideas coming from Québec, as we will see, had influenced, whether well or badly, the French reception.

But first of all, I need to emphasize the fact that Collingwood’s thought has been established in France in order to give answer to a French historiographical debate, and to help the settlement of a French school of critical history.

To better understand this point, I suggest that we examine the frontispiece of a French classic book by the historian Henri Irénée Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* (1954). Marrou is, unless I am mistaken, the first one in France who carefully reads Collingwood, and he introduces especially Collingwood’s philosophy of history. On this frontispiece we notice three mountains, respectively Kant, Hegel and Hume which correspond to the three originators

¹ Vincent Descombes, « Alasdair MacIntyre en France », *Revue internationale de philosophie* 2013/2 (n° 264), p. 135-156.

² Henri-Irénée Marrou, *De la connaissance historique*, Editions du Seuil, Points, Histoire, 1954, p.21.

of the philosophy of history. As we can see, nothing is said about Voltaire who Collingwood however depicted as the inventor of the term “philosophy of history”.³ For Marrou, the reflection on history comes from abroad. He adds to those three mountains, two clouds, independent and autonomous clouds. The first cloud, “Nietzsche” which rain feed the phenomenological tradition, enlarging the Kantian source. The second cloud, Kierkegaard, offering a rather thin rain and which seems to hide the mounts Kant and Hegel more than to fecundate their rivers. Two traditions get our attention: the rich and fruitful river passing through Dilthey, Max Weber until Raymond Aron. This is the central river, coming from Kant and at that time the last work is the 1938 book by Raymond Aron : *Introduction à la philosophie de l'histoire. Essai sur les limites de l'objectivité historique*. Marrou would say that thanks to Aron “critical philosophy of history has been embedded in French culture”⁴ It is clear for any reader of Marrou that he himself is following that tradition. However, a second and really flourishing river, coming from a little and remote mountain Hume, through Richard Whately, theologian and logician (1 February 1787 – 8 October 1863) and Thomas Arnold (Professor of Modern History, Oxford) (13 June 1795 – 12 June 1842), becomes a large river thanks to Bradley, Oakeshott, and the Hegelian affluent through Croce to Collingwood. We can notice an imprecision : Bradley seems to be only influenced by a English tradition, which is really doubtful for those who know is interest in the Hegelian tradition.

However, what is important here is what we learn about Collingwood. In 1954, H. Marrou as an historian considers Collingwood as a vital thinker of the philosophy of history, even more fruitful than Bergson and Péguy, more interesting than the Heideggerian tradition. Marrou writes that Collingwood is an author “whose philosophical thought deserves the most careful examination.”⁵ Nevertheless, this river is on the margins of the philosophy of history. It seems to be a strange hybridization of Croce and the British tradition, it appears at first sight for Marrou as an extreme vision of history, a theory that overtakes the rational limits and brings with it, as he pointed out: “the dangerous ghost of idealism.”⁶ And the French tradition seems to be protected from such a ghost.

I suggest here to interrogate the French reception of Collingwood by asking how Collingwood is used in France and perceived as a borderline case for the epistemology of history. In order to answer that question, first I am going to examine Collingwood in the turmoil of the French debate regarding the epistemology of history, and second to examine the invention of a Collingwoodian method associated with Michel Foucault’s *Archéologie du savoir* which leads to an “archeology of philosophy” defined by the Professor Alain de Libera.

I/ From H. Marrou to P. Ricoeur: Collingwood in the turmoil of historical epistemology

As the cascade around the name of Aron signaled it on the frontispiece of Marrou’s book, the debate regarding an epistemology of history in France is tumultuous. In *De la*

³ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p.3.

⁴ H.I. Marrou (1954), p.20 : « Il a fallu attendre 1938 pour qu’avec les deux thèses retentissantes de Raymond Aron la philosophie critique de l’histoire fût enfin intégrée à la culture française. »

⁵ *Ibid.* p.21 : « dont la pensée philosophique mérite aussi le plus attentif examen.3

⁶ *Ibid.* p.59 : « Le dangereux fantôme de l’idéalisme ».

connaissance historique, Marrou asks the following question : “In a word, what is the correct behaviour of reason in its historical use ?”⁷ What is needed, he tells us, is : “A treaty of historian virtues”. So, trying to settle a correct and cogent theory of critical history, after Dilthey and Aron, Marrou introduces Collingwood precisising that he will focus on two books : *An Autobiography* and *The Idea of History*.

A) Collingwood, an ally against Positivism

For a reader used to Collingwood’s books it is impossible when reading Marrou not to see Collingwood everywhere. First of all, Collingwood is used to struggle against positivism, because Marrou and Aron as Collingwood before the Second World War, have to discuss the positivists presuppositions. Especially, the relation between history and the historian. According to Marrou, historians can no longer state that history preexists to the work of the historian, meaning that the work of the historian would only be to discover, or to uncover historical facts.

Marrou’s enemies here are two French historians of the nineteenth century Charles-Victor Langlois and Charles Seignobos⁸. Those two are precisely mentioned by Collingwood several times in his work. For example, in *The Idea of History* (P.143), in the chapter on the English tradition, he writes: “More recently still, the kind of logic which professes to be most up to date has inspired a text-book by Miss L. Susan Stebbing (*A Modern Introduction to Logic*, edn.2, London, 1933). This contains one chapter on historical method (chapter XIX, esp. pp.382-8). Its substance is derived entirely from a well-known French manual written by Langlois and Seignobos (*Introduction aux études historiques*, Paris, 1898) to expound the pre-scientific form of history which I call ‘scissors-and-paste history’.”

Collingwood reproaches Stebbing neglect of the revolution in the philosophy of history and Marrou, in the same vein adds that what logically precedes all historical work is not the “document”, the “archives”, but the “question” asked by the historian. We meet again Collingwood and the necessity of the logic of question/answer.

Yet, Marrou tends to distance himself from Collingwood by refusing what he calls “reconstruction” (which is an approximative translation of re-enactment). Marrou, as an heir of

⁷ « En un mot quel est le comportement correct de la raison dans son usage historique ? »

⁸ H.I. Marrou (1954), p.50-51 « Feuilletons le parfait manuel de l'érudit positiviste, notre vieux compagnon le Langlois et Seignobos : à leurs yeux, l'histoire apparaît comme l'ensemble des « faits » qu'on dégage des documents ; elle existe, latente, mais déjà réelle, dans les documents, dès avant qu'intervienne le labeur de l'historien. Suivons la description des opérations techniques de celui-ci : l'historien trouve les documents puis procède à leur « toilette », c'est l'oeuvre de la critique externe, « technique de nettoyage et de raccommodage » : on dépouille le bon grain de la balle et de la paille; la critique d'interprétation dégage le témoignage dont une sévère « critique interne négative de sincérité et d'exactitude » détermine la valeur (le témoin a-t-il pu se tromper? A-t-il voulu nous tromper?); peu à peu s'accumulent dans nos fiches le pur froment des « faits » : l'historien n'a plus qu'à les rapporter avec exactitude et fidélité, s'effaçant derrière les témoignages reconnus valides.

En un mot, il ne construit pas l'histoire, il la retrouve : Collingwood, qui ne ménage pas ses sarcasmes à une telle conception de la « connaissance historique préfabriquée, qu'il n'y aurait qu'à ingurgiter et recracher », appelle cela « l'histoire faite avec des ciseaux et un pot de colle », *scissors and paste* 3. Ironie méritée, car rien n'est moins exact qu'une telle analyse, qui ne rend pas compte des démarches réelles de l'esprit de l'historien. »

Aron, tries to find a new place for the historian at work, an historian that would refuse in one hand the immediate intuition of the “facts” and in another hand refuses a “reconstruction” which would only find its limits in the power of its imagination. In one hand, the positivism of Langlois and Seignobos, in the other the “ghost of idealism”. And Collingwood is identified as the representant of this extreme method, based on an idealist epistemology that Marrou won’t accept : “We must take charge of exorcising again the dangerous ghost of idealism : we must limit the part of autonomous “construction””⁹

It seems to be the same charges that Paul Ricoeur asserted against R.G. Collingwood in his book *Temps et Récit* in 1983. But, Ricoeur speaking about the Aron/Marrou’s tradition, writes : “to the extent that historians are implicated in the understanding and explanation of past events, an absolute event cannot be attested to by historical discourse. Understanding—even the understanding of another person in everyday life—is never a direct intuition but always a reconstruction.”¹⁰

So, what exactly is the difference between Marrou’s definition of the historian work and Collingwood’s? Does Ricoeur criticizes Marrou’s reading of Collingwood?

B) Collingwood’s excessive methodology: the problem of Idealism

Ricoeur’s book, *Time and Narrative* is dedicated to the memory of Henri-Irénée Marrou, and we know that the two authors were close.¹¹ So, to better understand Ricoeur’s exposition and critics of Collingwood’s argument, it is necessary to explain well what Marrou means.

Marrou writes: “I find it very poorly this sentence which R.G. Collingwood, in his effort for a really rational theory of history, has decided to state : “History as re-enactment of past experience.” (Il faut le déclarer avec force : l'historien ne se propose pas pour tâche (à supposer que la chose soit concevable sans contradiction) de ranimer, de faire revivre, de ressusciter le passé ; ce ne sont là que des métaphores ; sans doute, en un sens, il rend à nouveau à l'existence du présent quelque chose qui, devenu du passé, avait cessé d'être, mais en devenant « histoire », en étant connu, le passé n'est pas simplement reproduit tel qu'il avait été quand il était le présent. Sans parler encore des innombrables transformations (transpositions, déformations, sélections) que lui auront fait subir les manipulations par lesquelles la raison historique aura élaboré sa connaissance, qu'il nous suffise pour l'instant de souligner que le passé assumé par l'histoire se trouve, par là même, affecté d'une qualification spécifique : il est connu en tant que passé. » (P.40) »)

⁹ Marrou (1954), p.51 : « Préoccupons-nous d'exorciser à nouveau le dangereux fantôme de l'idéalisme : limitons la part de « construction » autonome que comporte une telle élaboration du questionnaire et de ses hypothèses annexes »

¹⁰ P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, University of Chicago Press, 1984, trad. K. Maclaughlin and David Pellauer, p.97. Et édition française page 177 : « dans la mesure où l'historien est impliqué dans la compréhension et l'explication des événements passés, un événement absolu ne peut être attesté par le discours historique. La compréhension – même la compréhension d'un autrui singulier dans la vie quotidienne – n'est jamais une intuition directe mais **une reconstruction**. »¹⁰

¹¹ A propos de la communauté des Murs Blancs, voir la biographie intellectuelle de Ricoeur par François Dosse (F. Dosse, *Paul Ricoeur*, La Découverte, Paris, 2008, 714 pages), ainsi que le récent Hugo Domenach, Léa Domenach, *Les Murs Blancs*, Grasset, Paris, 2021.

What Marrou reproaches to Collingwood, it is the famous motto of Leopold Ranke “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” “integral resurrection of the past” – and such a resurrection is not possible for Marrou. First, because the past can’t be reproduced exactly as it was, then because the past will always remain a past thing. Yet, Collingwood seems to identify past and present thanks to his theory of re-enactment, and it doesn’t seem to be a metaphorical identification but the consequence of an epistemological apprehension of History.

Collingwood, in Marrou’s words, appears to us as a borderline-case : as far as he criticizes positivism in history, he could be followed, but as soon as he reintroduced his idealism, his thought is confused. Collingwood wrote in *An Autobiography* “There was once a very able and distinguished philosopher who was converted to Fascism. As a philosopher, that was the end of him. No one could embrace a creed so fundamentally muddle-headed and remain capable of clear thinking.”¹² Collingwood’s portrayal by Marrou seems to be the same, here Fascism is only replaced by Idealism: an Idealist can’t have a proper understanding of history. The reason given by Marrou is essentially related to the role of imagination, an irrational element, in the rational theory of history. But Marrou seems to regret it and Ricoeur after him, pointed out the fact that maybe Marrou hasn’t read correctly Collingwood. However, if Ricoeur suggests that he would have a better understanding of Collingwood, he concludes his chapter by underlining the identity of the past and the present in Collingwood’s thought.

Thus, Ricoeur’s statements are paradoxical : on one side, he announces in Tome 1 of *Temps et Récit* that Marrou’s critics of Collingwood are unfitted, in an other side, he writes in Tome III that it is impossible to follow Collingwood because : “His whole enterprise breaks down over this impossibility of passing from thought about the past as my thought to thought about the past as other than my own. The identity of reflection cannot account for the otherness of repetition.”¹³

C) Ricoeur’s point of view on Collingwood: archives and sources of a misunderstanding

I have conducted a little inquiry in Paul Ricoeur’s archives at the Institut Protestant de Théologie (Paris). By chance, Ricoeur has organized all his archives and given his entire personal library before his death. So, there is a file entitled “Notes on the philosophy of history”, an entire file dedicated to several authors that Ricoeur discusses in *Time and Narrative*. I have classified the names of the authors, as you can see here. However, if Collingwood appears on numerous pages, there is no notes on his books. He is quoted as an inspirator for Toulmin, Mink, Dray, White, and I have drawn arrows to show the influences. So, I was really disappointed to see that Ricoeur seemed to have only read Collingwood through Marrou, and I was ready to leave the archives, when I turned to Ricoeur’s private library. There is, on the shelves two books of Collingwood: *Principles of Art* and *The Idea of History*, consciously annotated. Moreover, and more importantly, there is a book from a French Canadian author Albert Shalom, entitled *R.G. Collingwood, philosophe et historien*.

¹² R.G. Collingwood, *An autobiography*, Oxford University Press, 1939, p.158.

¹³ P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Tome III, p.147. Et en français, p.263 : « Toute l’entreprise de Collingwood se brise sur l’impossibilité de passer de la pensée du passé comme *mien* à la pensée du passé comme *autre*. »

Thanks to the historical distance that we have now, it is possible to say that this book has been a real disaster for the study of R.G. Collingwood's philosophy. The main thesis of the author, Albert Shalom, is, as he wrote in the first pages, that Collingwood's thought is not "convincing" and that it is either complicated or impossible to find unity in it. Shalom like Knox before him wants to focus on one aspect of Collingwood's philosophy to underline one color, a unique flavor : Collingwood has been Collingwood only once, the rest is a long decay caused by the limits of his dogmatism. The desire to find a unity "*à tout prix*" in Collingwood's thought leads Shalom to a reduction of Collingwood's *telos* : Collingwood has a neo-hegelian schedule, he is programmed as an idealist and nothing can change his mind. To all those confused ideas, those characteristics well-known by Collingwood's critics, Shalom adds a *coup de grâce* and writes : "Those indications are sufficient to show that Collingwood is foreign to all the philosophical activities of his own milieu and of his own time." (I am currently writing my PhD thesis to show the complete opposite opinion).

Unfortunately, Shalom's book is the only attempt, in French, to give a complete and exhaustive study of Collingwood's thought. However, I can't say that Ricoeur is entirely influenced by such a book, because he reads English as well as French and as we saw he has other sources. But it is a fact that the only systematic study of Collingwood is concluded by emphasizing a recurrent problem in his thought: his attachment to idealists' arguments, his impossibility to overcome the aporetic conclusions of Idealism. It is sufficient to raise doubts in the mind of the French reader of his books.

Finally, and it is more benefic for the propagation of Collingwood's philosophy, Ricoeur knows Collingwood through Gadamer whose book has been translated, thanks to Ricoeur, in French : *Vérité et Méthode*. A translation realized by Pierre Fruchon who wrote an article entitled : "Signification de l'histoire de la philosophie selon l'autobiographie de Collingwood (1958)". An article influenced by the theory of Collingwood's radical conversion to historicism, and Fruchon insists, after Knox, on the fact that the author of the autobiography is not "the true Collingwood". One cannot help to ask for what reason we must read an autobiography whose author is not the real biographer of his own life – a vertiginous thought.

To conclude on Ricoeur's archives, this little enquiry helped me to capture the constellation of authors who inspired Ricoeur in his work on Collingwood. It helps me to understand more clearly Ricoeur's ambiguity about Collingwood. On one hand, Collingwood is taken seriously in Dray, Toulmin and Mink's books, but on the other side when Collingwood's is read in the French tradition of epistemology in History, suspicion is the rule. Collingwood is this "esprit curieux, un peu bizarre" presented by Marrou, isn't he outside of his time, as Shalom put it, stuck in his old and obsolete idealism ?

So, if we want to re-enact Ricoeur's arguments against Collingwood, it is necessary to have in our minds this context. In chapter 3 of Tome III of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur gives a precise examination of Collingwood's epistemology. In this chapter entitled "Reality of historical past", it is no longer Marrou's interrogation on the historian subjectivity but the question of whether the past is "real" and to which degree of reality it belongs. And here comes Collingwood. Ricoeur suggests that our vision of the past could be classified thanks to the "leading kinds" that Plato elaborates in his *Sophist* : "I only

maintain that we can say something meaningful about the past in thinking about it successively in terms of the Same, the Other, and the Analogous.”¹⁴

And Ricoeur presents as follows the first kind: “The first way of thinking about the pastness of the past is to dull the sting of what is at issue, namely, temporal distance. [...] In short, is the past intelligible any other way than as persisting in the present?”¹⁵. And he adds: “This conception based on identity is illustrated in striking fashion by the conception of history as a “reenactment” of the past, to use the expression of R.G. Collingwood in his *The Idea of History*.”¹⁶

Though Collingwood is introduced as the example of the philosopher of the identity of past and present, Ricoeur precises that we need to read carefully Collingwood, and that he is aware of the debate regarding the definition of the “re-enactment”. He refers to Dray and the redefinition of the re-enactment when he writes : “This abrupt access to reenactment has the drawback, however, of giving credit to the idea that reenactment is a form of intuition. But to reenact does not consist in reliving what happened. And rethinking already contains the critical moment that requires us to detour by way of the historical imagination.”¹⁷ So, reenactment is not a magical action undertaken by the historian, it is the conclusion of a method in history.

However, after developing cautiously this Collingwoodian epistemology, Ricoeur refutes it : “At the end of this analysis, we have to say that historians do not know the past at all but only their own thought about the past. But history is not possible unless historians know that they reenact an act that is not their own.”

To sum up, Collingwood is depicted as the one who introduces in history, through the imagination, an identity of past and present. An identity caused by the very mind of the historian : the historian can’t escape his own mind, he can’t know anything except his mind, otherness remains unknown because unreachable. Furthermore, re-enactment in its purpose to seize the authenticity of the past, would forget the changes that time brings with it, re-enactment trying to access the past would neglect the temporal development : traces, traditions and all the things that bear the reality of the past.

It seems to be a conclusion not really far from the one by Marrou. Ricoeur seems to have forgotten what he wrote, referring to Dray : “reenact does not consist in reliving”. He seems to have forgotten too what Collingwood had written in *The Idea of History* regarding the subject-matter of History : “Thirdly, even thought itself, in its immediacy as the unique act of thought with its unique context in the life of an individual thinker, is not the object of historical knowledge. It cannot be re-enacted ; if it could, time itself would be cancelled and the historian would be the person whom he thinks, living over again in all respects the same.”¹⁸

Ricoeur claims for a suppression of temporal distance, a suppression that Collingwood himself refuses. Finally, in his book *La mémoire, l’histoire et l’oubli* in 2000, Ricoeur takes

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.143.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.144.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*. p.145.

¹⁸ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford, ... P.303

a step further, giving up all precautions and comparing Collingwood to Michelet, the re-enactment is now defined as a “resurrection”.¹⁹

Recent publications of Collingwood’s works on anthropology tends to make Ricoeur’s statements illegitimate. If Collingwood is the example of the kind the “Same”, it is because, he, supposedly, would be opposed to the conception of the Other in History. But, Collingwood in the texts compiled in *The Philosophy of Enchantment* criticizes the positivist vision which reduces the past, or the cultural differences, by capturing them through one and unique point of view. Collingwood repeats tirelessly that it is necessary to be aware of the otherness, arguing in favor of a sympathetic understanding of cultural differences. Lastly, a quotation from *Libellus de Generatione* would prove my point, I think that here, Ricoeur identifies Collingwood’s thought with what Collingwood would defined as “subjectivism”, that sort of Realism he criticized in *Libellus de Generatione*. Saying that in subjectivism : “The idea of anything existing in another place or at another time from myself is in short an impossibility : everything is here and now, and space and time are absolutely negated. [...] the this, the here, the now, in general the subjective and immediate, is asserted in such a way that the very possibility of any otherness is denied.”²⁰

Ricoeur’s conclusions can’t be satisfying, but we can see too well the background of it. Collingwood is, over and over, disqualified too easily. If he is described as a genius, it is to underline his romantical tendency to overestimate the power of imagination. And he is not really taken seriously.

Collingwood in France is not seated in his rightful place. He is used as an ally in the struggle against positivism, and then he is discarded. He is used as a scarecrow for epistemological history: if you want to develop a rational understanding of the past, you should not follow him.

We must then give up his epistemology. So what is left of him ? His philosophy of Art ? His theory of the philosophical concepts ? His definition of absolute presuppositions? His moral philosophy ? No, Collingwood in France is stuck in the historiographical debate. And it is in the debate on the history of philosophy that he reappears, in the nineties, thanks to Professeur Alain de Libera.

II/ A Collingwoodian method: a creation by Alain de Libera?

Alain de Libera, specialist of Medieval history of philosophy and Professor at the Collège de France knows very well the critics addressed to Collingwood. He is a reader of the historian Paul Veyne and knows that the latter wrote in *Comment on écrit l’histoire?* that Collingwood is a relativist close to Hegel and Toynbee (the reader of *The Idea of History* can’t hide his astonishment, especially if he remembers page 159 when Toynbee is compared to

¹⁹ Voir à ce sujet l’article de J. Barash « Qu’est ce que la « réalité » du présent historique ? Réflexions à partir de la théorie de l’histoire chez Paul Ricoeur. », *Le Télémaque*, 2017/1 (N.51), P.89 à 106, Presses Universitaires de Caen.

²⁰ R.G. Collingwood, *Libellus de Generatione. An Essay in Absolute Empiricism*, p.431.

positivists). Anyway, Paul Veyne, like others is a reader of Albert Shalom, and his only sources to classify Collingwood as an historicist, is Shalom.

Nevertheless, it is this very relativism that interests Alain de Libera. Before giving his lessons on medieval history of philosophy at the Collège de France, Libera already claims his desire to belong to a Collingwoodian tradition. Is it only a fashion, a rebellious position, willingly on the margin? Or, is it a new reading of Collingwood, a method useful for history ?

A) Another Collingwood:

For those who don't know Alain de Libera, it could be helpful to precise that he is quite an eccentric philosopher, or perceived as such in France. His taste for Anglo-Saxon philosophy, his specialization in medieval philosophy and his appetite for Derrida's theories of deconstruction, as well as Michel Foucault's methodology, especially in the *Archéologie du savoir*, differentiate him from the rest of the French philosophical landscape.

We need to precise that it is not a coincidence if the renewal of interest in Collingwood's method is particularly strong in Medieval history of Philosophy. It is precisely because specialists of this period try to find new way for investigation, new methods to overcome the pattern inherited by the old method of Etienne Gilson and the *telos* of a Christian philosophy.

Finally, to end with the context of Collingwood's reception, it has to be said that Alain de Libera is influenced by two schools which were alive during the fifties and sixties : first Martial Guérout's school at the Collège de France, second Ferdinand Alquié's school at the Sorbonne. This historiographical debate opposed the partisans of an history of philosophy which is interested in "the internal coherences, axioms, deductive chains, compatibilities" and an other school interested in "tradition, cultural continuities" (Foucault, *Archéologie du savoir*, p.11-12). In other words, for Alquié's school the problem is "tradition, trace, continuity for Guérout it is: "transformations, renewal, rupture". Libera introduced Collingwood in such a debate, a debate fed par Michel Foucault in his *Archéologie du savoir* where he tries to defined an archeological method for the historian centered on the study of archives.

Enough here for the context. In his lectures on the 20th of March 2014, Libera explains for what purpose he uses Collingwood : "Follow the program of *Les Mots et les Choses* in a field like medieval logic might seem completely absurd, but I put some water in my wine by researching – with others at that time, though a bit isolated in France – to inflect the notions of "episteme", "field of presence" and "historical *a priori*" of Foucault, and this thanks to a text that I often quote, including in my opening lecture, but about which we need to say things a bit more precise : Robin George Collingwood's autobiography. This English philosopher is more or less absolutely forgotten in France, but he is not everywhere (in Québec for example)".²¹

Collingwood received two new titles : he is forgotten and he is "water" in Foucault's wine. Libera adds about Collingwood's book : "This work helps me to better understand my activity ; it gives me strength to carry on my researches in the field of the history of corpus ; it

²¹ Alain de Libera, *L'archéologie philosophique*, Séminaire du Collège de France 2013-2014, Vrin, 2016.
Traduction par mes soins.

gave me several philosophical and basic principles for the approach I used to call “epistemic” and he defined today as “archeological”²².

It is not then a Collingwood similar to the one studied by Ricoeur, Marrou and Fruchon. First, because Libera is more interested in the *Autobiography* than in *The Idea of History* and then because he is not interested in the epistemological question of the reality of the past, the cancellation of time, he rather prefers Collingwood’s method, the complex of question/answer.

As Libera pointed out : “The work of an historian who follows Collingwood’s method, one who would act as an archeologist of philosophy, as I defined it, has to re-enact a original questionnaire, which dispose of a certain number of propositions which are answers to questions. We must take together the answer, the question and the questionnaire in which the answer and the question are inserted. This is the method that Collingwood called *Constructive Reenactment*, summarized by W.H. Dray’s formula : “All history is a re-enactment of past thought as expressed in past action.” Dray’s formula combine two majors ideas of Collingwood : Re-enactment and following and recurring thesis : “*All history is the history of thought*”.”

Here Libera tries to build the image of a new Collingwood in France, thanks to a method he calls “archeology of philosophy”. A method, we should note, that Collingwood the archeologist has never called this way. We must admit then that it is a new face of Collingwood, another Collingwood whose utility should be find in the renewal of the history of philosophy.

B) Pascal Engel et Alain de Libera : virtues of a Collingwood relativist, holist and archeologist of philosophy

Our preliminary thesis was that every philosophy imported on a foreign soil would find itself wearing local clothes. Collingwood who has never discussed with Michel Foucault has now made a new acquaintance with several structuralists’ authors and is contemporary with Alain de Libera. How is it possible?

Since 1990’s, in *L’Art des généralités* and *La Querelle des Universaux*, Alain de Libera develops a new method in the history of philosophy which tries to escape finalism and other kinds of historical errors : “We must reject *finalism* which polarize ten centuries around one event of thought supposedly dominant, as well as a *metonymic practice of history* which demands that to each century corresponds one and only one attitude regarding knowledge, attested in one singular work and underlined by one name.”²³

If finalism and the metonymic practice of history are rejected, other errors remain, like the conception of eternal problems. Alain de Libera works on the Universals in medieval period, and wants to show that can’t be understood as an eternal problem, that’s why he refers to a famous book in France *La Dispute* by Pascal Engel, which is a introduction to the debate opposing analytical tradition and continental tradition. A debate exposed through the discussion between two characters embodying the two traditions, and a third one acting like a referee. In one letter, written by Analyphron, hero of the analytic tradition, the latter writes : “Collingwood defends here – like you – a thesis we could call the thesis of *holism of the philosophical*

²² *Ibid*, p.17.

²³ Alain de Libera, *La querelle des Universaux*, p.27

problems.” And he defines it as follow : “Every truth, even a global one, would be “transitory” (transient would say Collingwood), and relative to an ensemble of P, T, and C. The opposite thesis is what we could call *atomism* of problems, concepts and philosophical thesis.”

In this book, Collingwood is labelled as radical holist who concludes that it impossible to “speak about one problem more or less similar in two different philosophers, nor isolate it to compare their thesis.” As a remark, I just want to say that it is contradictory with Collingwood’s opinion in *An Autobiography* p.62 : “Anybody would admit that Plato’s *Republic* and Hobbes’s *Leviathan* are about two things which are in one way the same thing and in another way different. That is not in dispute. What is in dispute is the kind of sameness and the kind of difference.”

Therefore, inspired by this exposition of Collingwood in Pascal Engel’s book, Libera mixed it with Foucault and defined in 1999 what he would labelled as his own “relativism in Collingwood style”, through seven thesis :

- 1) The object of the *Problemgeschichte* is not history of problems but the study of “the structure of complexes constituted of questions and answers” (CQA)
- 2) The historian’s business is never *prima facie* “philosophical truths”
- 3) There are no permanent problems (nor *a fortiori* “eternal” problems)
- 4) Transitory problems like P₁, P₂, P₃... are not instances of an arch-problem P, but transitory CQA.
- 5) To say that a CQA is “transitory” doesn’t mean that he is conceptually volatile, but that, through a long process, it has been transformed into something else.
- 6) If a contemporary philosopher read an author X from the past, and he attributes to him the thesis T, although serious exegesis demonstrates that X never asserted T, he is perfectly vain to perpetuate this attribution.
- 7) After being considered, described and analyzed in his original CQA, a theory can be *discussed* separately and *compared* to another theory belonging to a different CQA. However, it cannot be *evaluated* with respect to this second CQA.

To this seven thesis, Libera adds thanks to a confrontation with Foucault, an important notion : “the limited space of communication”. Quoting M. Foucault in *Archéologie du savoir*, p.166 : “This unity [...] cannot allows us to say which of those works are closer to the primary destination, or ultimate, which one would express the more radically general project of a science. But, what it lets appear the measure within which Buffon and Linné (or Turgot and Quesnay, Broussais and Bichat) spoke of “the same thing”, by CF ARCHEOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE.

The reason why Libera uses Foucault and Collingwood is first of all in order to delimitate a space within which authors may speak the same language, and might build their thesis on the same texts. In this method called “Archeology of philosophy” the purpose is to find for what reason an author tries to defend a thesis, enquiring in his web,

his influences, and all the corpus of archives which constitute the living matter of his work.

This method implies also an analytical attitude, because after the historical study, an analysis must be conducted as it is written in thesis 6 and 7.

That's why Libera concludes his introduction to his method by this words : "It is not anymore the epoch where the French frog could only choose between two types of Oxen : Rudolf Carnap and Victor Cousin. Time has come for every *froggies*, whether they are continental or analytical, to overcome wrong quarrels and to let ruminant ruminate. Philosophers must practice philosophy ; historian of philosophy must practice history of philosophy. They can meet together, if they want to, and collaborate, if they think it is of any use [...] Collingwoodian relativism as I defend it has not for goal to reduce philosophy to history of philosophy. Nor to confine philosophical activity to "incommensurables conceptual schemes" within an era or another. Its only ambition is to furnish a basis and a method proper and particular for the work the historian of philosophy. (Alain de Libera, 1999).

Conclusion: To conclude, Collingwood's thought has been really poorly studied and understood in France. Moreover, two paradoxical versions of his philosophy of history emerged from the French critics : with Marrou and Ricoeur, Collingwood is read as a defender of a cancellation of time, an identity between past and present. Whereas, with Alain de Libera and Pascal Engel, Collingwood is a complete relativist, a radical historicist whose philosophy lead to an understanding of the diversity and the alterity of thought. On one hand, it is identity, the Same as Ricoeur put it, on the other it is Otherness.

However, if we follow Collingwood's method, it is necessary to look for an explanation of his thought not through our present philosophical enquiries, but through his own dialogue with his time. This is, for me, the major work that has to be done in France : contrary to what Shalom supposed, I want to prove that Collingwood was a man of his time and that all his philosophical theories can be explained thanks to the context of their emergence, and must be explained through an historical context.

Finally, such an understanding of Collingwood could only be possible thanks to precise studies on his thought and exclusively on his thought (not in a debate foreign to it). The work has begun, we can take for example the articles by Paulette Carrive or by Laurent Jaffro. Secondly, a work of translations is necessary to give to the French philosophers the opportunity to grasp more widely the importance of Collingwood thought. Thus, the river Collingwood would be revivified, and we could add new names after him.