

English presentation « *But what does 'survive' mean?* »

R.G. Collingwood's paradoxical philosophy of history according to Paul Ricoeur

Baudouin de Guillebon

FNRS / PhD student UClouvain (Belgium)

Introduction

“But what does ‘survive’ mean?” This question is asked by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in his famous book *Time and Narrative* in a paragraph dedicated to Collingwood’s philosophy of history. This question arises after a presentation of Collingwood’s doctrine of “re-enactment” which appears to be, in Ricoeur’s opinion, paradoxical.

Indeed, according to Ricoeur’s demonstration, the results of the act of “re-enactment” are unsatisfactory and even counter-productive because the very notion of temporality seems to be canceled. To Ricoeur’s point of view, there is a contradiction between the possibility of seizing thoughts of the past as they were and the idea of a survival of past thought in the present which implies modifications of the past, and the notion of process. Hence, Collingwood would maintain a double thesis the parts of which are opposed: an identification of present and past thought on the one hand, a temporal process of survival of the past in the present in the other hand. According to Ricoeur, those two theses cannot work together, and the re-enactment is performed at the expense of the temporal distance. Thus, in Ricoeur hermeneutics’ approach, Collingwood’s philosophy of history leads to the impossibility of knowing the past “as other than my own”, to quote Ricoeur.

In 1994, William Dray wrote in his article “Was Collingwood an Historical Constructionist?” that the notion of “past surviving in the present” is “obscure” and for the Canadian philosopher it is not so much a problem caused by the re-enactment but by the idea of a survival of the past in the present. Indeed, this natural process of the past passing through ages seems metaphorical, a description of time as a wave depositing its foam on the beach, “this ardent sobbing which rolls from age to age” as Baudelaire would say.

However, if the notion of survival is only metaphorical, must we admit that the re-enactment identifies the past and the present, resulting in what Angela Requate calls an “eternal present” in Collingwood’s philosophy of history?

I examine these critiques by redefining the concept of survival of the past in the present and articulating it with two terms: “traces” and “residue” used by Collingwood. This study would eventually lead us to ask whether there is a true conception of Time in Collingwood’s philosophy, by focusing on his *Libellus de Generatione*.

I / Ricoeur’s analysis and doubts on survival and re-enactment

The discussion of Collingwood's interpretation of the philosophy of history occurs at least three times in Ricoeur's work. First in 1984 in the Aquinas Lecture at the Marquette University entitled "The Reality of Historical Past" which is a quasi-final draft of what will be published in the third volume of *Time and Narrative*. Finally in *Memory, History and Forgetting* in 2000 Ricoeur offers a synthesis of his view of Collingwood, placing him between the lyrical resurrectionists and the dreamers, the idealists.

I will refer mainly to *Time and Narrative*. In this chapter, Ricoeur categorizes three different approaches to understanding the past, which he organizes under Plato's great genres "The Same, The Other and The Analogue". At first, I thought, that it was a random categorization, but after some research, I discover that Ricoeur took this idea from his friend's book, *De la Connaissance historique* wrote by the French historian Henri-Irénée Marrou who studied Collingwood too, but Ricoeur doesn't cite his sources. Collingwood is introduced as an instance of the great genre of the Same, because according to Ricoeur he exemplifies the identification of past and present: "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."¹

Is there such an identification in Collingwood's thought? Does this mean that the historian can only know his own past? But Collingwood distinguishes a personal past which he calls "memory" from a past in general, the subject-matter of history.

To better understand Ricoeur's statement, we should carefully read his demonstration. In his Lecture on *The Reality of Historical Past* he explains that Collingwood's philosophy of history erases or suppresses the past through three steps that constitute the main body of his method:

- 1) First, Collingwood affirms that historical work must be based on documents and evidence. This characteristic of the history of human affairs indicates the difference with the study of natural changes. Ricoeur writes: "Only a historical event lends itself to the dissociation of the "inside" face of the event, which has to be called "thought", and the "outside" face, which stems from natural changes."²
- 2) The second part of this conception of the past is "the notion of reenactment as the act of rethinking what was once thought for the first time." Ricoeur takes time to specify that rethinking does not mean reliving (contrary to what he writes in his last book *Memory, History and Forgetting* where Collingwood is identified to the resurrectionists of the past). This moment of re-thinking contains a critical moment. So the historian is his own authority in the face of the documents, he uses his imagination to approach the past : "the criterion for his judgement is the coherence of his construction."
- 3) Third step : The re-enactment is "numerically identical with the initial thought", *id est*. the thought of the past that the historian is studying. The historical imagination constructs an image of the past, but this image cannot be anything other than the past, it must be the past, the historian's thought must be exactly the same as the thought of the past. Therefore, Ricoeur concludes that temporal distance is cancelled or abolished: "This annihilation constitutes the philosophical (hyper-epistemological) significance of re-enactment."³

¹ P. RICŒUR, *Time and narrative. Volume 3, op. cit.*, p. 147.

² *Ibid.*, p. 144.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

To illustrate this conclusion, Ricoeur quotes the first section of the "Epilegomena (Human Nature and Human History) in *The Idea of History*: "Thoughts, we are told, are in one sense events that happen in time, but in another sense they are not at all in time"⁴. In Nature, each moment dies and is replaced by another one. But in history the "past survives in the present". Hence the following question of Ricoeur: "But what 'does' survive mean here?" He answers unequivocally: "Nothing apart from the act of reenactment. The only meaningful thing, in the final analysis, is the current possession of past activity."

Here, for Ricoeur, lies the paradox of Collingwood's philosophy of history: it is not the past that survives in the form of traces in the present, because the notion of "survival" and "heritage" are natural processes, and because the trace is only a trace when it is thought as a trace. In other words, the trace becomes a trace when its temporality is abolished by the atemporal act of rethinking the event. The passage of the trace in time, for example, of a manuscript through the ages is only a natural process. According to Ricoeur, this idealistic thesis leads to a conception based on identity in which the ideas of process : "acquisition, incorporation and development" are set aside. The first two letters of re-enactment are rather problematic: the "re" freezes time in order to capture a moment, to identify present and past.

Finally, the very notion of "inside and outside" of an event is questioned by Ricoeur : "This split lies at the origin of the disarticulation of the very notion of historical time into two notions that both negate it: on the one side, change, where one occurrence comes to replace another; on the other side, the atemporality of the act of thinking." Ricoeur concludes by saying that : "The very mediations that make historical time a mixed form of time are lost: the survival of the past that makes the trace possible, the tradition that we inherit, the preservation that makes new possession possible."

The French philosopher seems to be touching on a crucial point here: is the historical character, the temporal development of a past object, annulled by being re-enacted ? If it is, what is the point of speaking of "survival"? Is it just a metaphorical vocabulary as William Dray seems to suggest in his article already quoted : ~~"When Collingwood declares, in 'The Limits of Historical Knowledge', that what is 'alone knowable' is not 'the past simply as past' but the past 'as residually preserved in the present', what he says, although clearly metaphorical, is intelligible enough taken as an implicit reference to the historian's dependence upon evidence."~~

II / Survival and "incapsulated thought": the process of thought in time

1)

Before responding to Ricoeur's strong critique, it is interesting to add a few more things. In an article published in Volume 5 of *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies* in 1999, Angela Requate offers an analysis of Collingwood's conception of time in History which echoes Ricoeur's demonstration. Her main thesis is that in Collingwood's writings "Time is eliminated from history" because Gentile's conception of history is fully accepted by Collingwood in *Speculum Mentis*, and she adds: "In the

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.146

absolute process of thought the past lives in the present...as the object of the mind's historical knowledge of itself in an eternal present."⁵

I will not go into a discussion of Gentile's influence on Collingwood here, except to remind you that this notion of eternal past is rejected by Collingwood in *Notes Towards a Metaphysics* when he speaks about Gentile: "There is therefore no real development: only an eternal present which does not enrich itself by taking up the past, but defecates a past out of the present. This seems to be subjective idealism."⁶ After refuting such a position, he adds: "There is no transition from one to another, nothing becomes, everything is in a timeless present."⁷

Ricoeurs' remarks on Collingwood seem to echo Requate's critique here: the notion of temporality is abolished because of the reenactment. And even if Collingwood seems to reject this position, is he able to escape such an idealistic point of view? Requate concludes by these words borrowed from Rotenstreich : "The relation of history to time remains a riddle in Collingwood's system in all its phases." Finally: "Collingwood aims to consider history *sub specie aeternatis* and thus expel time from history."

2) To sum up, Collingwood's philosophy of history is an eternalist conception of history because past objects are only accessible through the present, and the only way to say that the past survives in the present is to admit that thought can stand outside of time. So, it is not a survival but an atemporal conception of thought and of past object in general. It is either a presentism or an eternalism, but in both cases temporal distance or temporality is abolished.

Collingwood's criticism of Gentile, however, seems to denounce this approach: he opposes subjective idealism to the development of time. Can we find in Collingwood's philosophy a conception of development and becoming that allows us to express doubts about Ricoeur's and Requate's readings?

The idea of passing time and temporal development is explored by Collingwood in his *Libellus de Generatione*. In this short essay, Collingwood introduces his metaphysics of becoming against the old metaphysics of being. After pointing out the contradictions between objective realism and subjective realism, Collingwood exposes what he calls "The World of Becoming". In this section, he defines identity through time as a dialectical process in which the past is negated, transcended and therefore is preserved in the present while no longer existing: "Identity then means that the past phase of the processus is preserved in the present phase: that the boy lives in the man, the father in the son, the savage in the citizen. The present affirms the past. Difference means that the past is transcended, is superseded, is no longer in existence; the present negates the past."

This "living past" reminds us of a book by F.S. Marvin where Wordsworth's line "The Child is the Father of Man" is placed at the beginning of chapter 2, a line often quoted by Collingwood. But, more notably, this definition of identity and difference is taken up by Collingwood in his New Leviathan at the other end of his philosophical life, under the label of "The Law of Primitive Survival".

⁵ A. REQUATE, « R. G. Collingwood and G. H. Mead on the Concept of Time in History », *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, vol. 5, n° 1, 1 janvier 1999, pp. 72-89.

⁶ R.G. (Robin G. COLLINGWOOD, *The Principles of History: And Other Writings in Philosophy of History*, Oxford, University Press, 1999, p. 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*

For Collingwood, in the *Libellus* it would be a complete misunderstanding to believe that the past is either in no way preserved in the present or that it could survive in the present totally “unchanged”. It is, in Collingwood’s work, the first idea of the past surviving in the present: it survives modified by the passage of time, but preserved, in a way. That’s why the past which lies in the present can’t be identical or even identified with the past “as it is” or “as it was”. At this point, we should remind our audience that Collingwood affirms in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (1926) that the past cannot be understood as real, there is no “past as it was”, there is no past that exists like a foreign country, waiting to be discovered. That’s why, Giusepinna d’Oro’s phrase in *Why Collingwood Matters* ? “The past as another country” doesn’t seem to reflect Collingwood’s conception of the past : the past is ideal in the sense that it no longer exists, but can be understood thanks to the historian’s mind. The past is not waiting somewhere for its resurrection. Indeed, the only past that exists must exist in the present.

But if the past has become the present, Dray explains that in the *Lectures of 1926* : “Collingwood unequivocally (and surely with good sense) affirms that what “turns into something else is by definition not that something.” So our perplexity remains: what is this something that survives in the present? In his article “Some Perplexities about Time with an Attempted Solution” Collingwood writes that the past doesn’t continue to exist in the present, but what continues to exist is : “the contribution it has made to the present.” So, present time bears consequences of the past, is it the only way to speak about “survival”?

III/ Thought can survive : why is that so special ?

The concept of “survival” in Collingwood’s philosophy in general can be apprehended differently in different contexts. It may be a survival in anthropology when Collingwood discusses Tylor’s definition of the word, or it may be a key concept in metaphysics. For example, in his text “Reality as history”, he writes that our conception of “human nature” is a survival inherited from old metaphysics. But this idea is really present, it is available to us, it is sometimes used by philosophers, or by people when they think about human nature. However, this idea comes from a different context of thought. As a survival, it is a witness of temporal distance, of change, it has been transmitted thanks to a tradition. Now, if I want to understand it, if I want to re-think it in its origins in the thought of Plato, for example, I have to think as Plato thought it. And I wouldn’t be able to do so without documents. When I am doing so, do I abolish temporal distance? We must say no because it is not possible to understand this conception of human nature without its transmission through time, without understanding the translations that are given to me. I am indebted to a body of traditions that enable me to understand it, and I do not identify myself with this thought in any way. I can say that this thought is different from mine, but I can identify my thought with it in order to understand it. I do not translate that thought into the present, as Collingwood remarks while he speaks of those who would identify a Greek boat *the trireme* with a steamer, on the pretext that they have the same function. I am well aware that this conception of Human Nature is a survival, and it is thanks to this survival that I can have an idea of the past. But that survival is not the past. To say that what survives is the past is a common mistake made by those whom Collingwood calls the scissors and paste historians: they believe that the texts available in the present are authorities that we must accept as if they were the exact past.

In order to find a constructive response to Ricoeur's critique we need to look at Collingwood's *Autobiography*. Ricoeur seems to focus mainly on *The Idea of History*, missing Collingwood's clear account of what he calls the living past. Indeed, in *The Autobiography* Collingwood emphasises the fact that: "By about 1920 this was my first principle of a philosophy of history : that the past which an historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present."

Here, Ricoeur and Dray can say that "in some sense" is vague and could only mean that metaphorically the past is living in the present, or that it is only in the historian's mind that the past lives in the present, and when he rethinks the past, he abolishes time.

But Collingwood goes on, and page 112 (one hundred twelve) he gives, I think, a definitive answer to Ricoeur's critics, and I quote: "But this re-enactment of Nelson's thought is a reenactment **with a difference**. Nelson's thought, as Nelson thought it and as I re-think it, is certainly one and the same thought; and yet in some way there is not one thought, there are two different thoughts. What was the difference? No question in my study of historical method ever gave me so much trouble; [...] The difference is one of context. To Nelson, that thought was a present thought; to me, it is a past thought living in the present but (as I have elsewhere put it) incapsulated, not free."

The difference of context might at first sight appear to be a pirouette or a meager response, but it sheds light on Ricoeur's misunderstanding. If reenactment is in some way a numerically identical rethinking of thoughts from the past, it doesn't stand outside time, it is performed by someone at another moment. So when we speak of reenactment in Collingwood's philosophy of history, we must not forget that it is "reenactment with a difference". A repetition that recalls of Collingwood's notion of identity with difference in his *Libellus de Generatione*.

So this thought here of Nelson survives in the present, but it is incapsulated in the present. It means that this thought does not arise to me in the present, it subsists in another plan, for example in a book of history, it is not a thought that is immediately present to me while I am living now, but I can enter into this thought through historical method, using the materials at my disposal.

To further respond to Ricoeurs' argument, one can refer to Collingwood's chapter on "re-enactment" in *The Idea of History*, where he invents an imaginary objector, whose statements resemble Ricoeur's. (page 290 *Epilegomena* : It was urged that an act of thought by becoming subjective ceases to be objective, and thus, by becoming present, ceases to be past ; I can only be aware of it as the act I am here and now performing, not as the act which someone else has performed at another time.")

To conclude, the notions of "difference", "contexts" and "survival" allow us to answer both Ricoeur's and Requate's criticisms. Collingwood does not intend to erase temporality in order to explain the role of the historian, nor to form an eternal conception of the present in order to grasp the past. On the contrary, he emphasises that time is a process, and that metaphysically speaking our world is a world of Becoming. So, in such a world, what "has been" is no longer but can survive in another form. This survival is necessary in order to write and to think historically.

But when a historian tries to understand an action of the past, he uses these survivals: documents, language, legends, oral tradition but he tries to think them with sympathy, to understand what the complex of questions/answers were to which they belonged, he tries to be, as we might say, in the present of these documents. But, as Collingwood's points out, the historian is never contemporary with his subject, the past doesn't exist any more, so what he reenacts is always radically different from him. If he wants to enter into those documents that are incapsulated in the present, he must be aware that he will always be a foreigner, even if he succeeds in penetrating deeply into the thought he is studying.

The passage of time is precisely understood by Collingwood in this notion of "survival". Ricoeur's reading of Collingwood is radical, and he is quick to dismiss Collingwood as an idealist because he was not able to enter Collingwood's own demonstration, which is rather ironic for a defender of the hermeneutic tradition. Finally, we can add that what Collingwood means by the power of mind to transcend time is not a power to suppress time, but the belief that, despite differences in context, epoch and custom, the great power of the mind is to transcend those differences in order to understand the purpose of actions from the past. Sometimes it is not possible because of a lack of evidence or the limitations of the historian's own mind.

This understanding of the power of the mind as immanent/transcendent and the capacity of thought to be the same lies at the background of this philosophy of history and could be illuminated by a reading of Collingwood's *Religion and philosophy* for example in his chapter on Personality. But I will stop here, I do not think we will have time here to re-read Collingwood on the basis of this concept of the past surviving in the present.

(Finally, I think that a better understanding of Collingwood's re-enactment could benefit the hermeneutics tradition. In a book published this year by Elias Palti, from the Seeley Lectures he gave in Cambridge, the author shows that the notion of "re-experience" is central to hermeneutics, from Dilthey to Gadamer, and he omitted Collingwood. (*Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change*).