

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Benedetto Croce and Ignazio Silone

Sir, — Giuseppe Tamburrano's letter (April 22) unwittingly confirms the central thesis of my review. Namely, that though some people require saints (and, apparently, devils too) and desire their history to be similarly black and white, they simplify reality and actually diminish those they claim to admire. Even heroes are human and so suffer from the same flaws as the rest of us.

Benedetto Croce's case is "straightforward" because, as I noted, he published most of the relevant documents himself. Though he did indeed support Mussolini in the vote of confidence of June 1924 following Giacomo Matteotti's murder, by October he was openly opposing him. For example, it was in that month that he formally broke with Giovanni Gentile, citing political differences as making their friendship no longer possible. So my statement that he went into "open opposition" in 1924 is correct (and confirmed by Fabio Fernando Rizi in his *Benedetto Croce and Italian Fascism*). As I also observed, Croce was a conservative liberal whose support for Mussolini was based on a pragmatic appraisal of what was needed to save the liberal regime from socialism, not a sign of his philosophical adherence to Fascism, as Gentile was to claim. That is clear not only from the "interview" he wrote for the *Giornale d'Italia* on July 9, 1924, defending his vote but also in the essays on politics — particularly that on "The State and Ethics", which he published in *La critica* of that year. Of course, many (myself included) will regard Croce's earlier support of Fascism as having been flawed even on its own terms. Yet, the fact that Croce himself was moved to reflect critically on his earlier

decisions actually makes him more rather than less interesting and admirable as a philosopher — not least because he was grappling with the genuine problem of how far everyday political decisions should (or can) be guided by comprehensive philosophical principles.

Tamburrano also oversimplifies my and others' accounts of Ignazio Silone. He implies the charge that Silone acted as a Fascist spy is a journalistic invention fabricated for malign or sensationalist purposes. In fact, the two scholars primarily responsible for the revelations, Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali, are university professors whose research has appeared in Italian and American refereed journals and in books published by major presses. Elizabeth Leake's own book, *The Reinvention of Ignazio Silone*, was awarded a prize by the Modern Language Association of America. The disputed points between Tamburrano and these other scholars concern the reliability of documents predating the arrest of Silone's brother, which indicate that he had been sending reports to the Italian police from as early as 1919. All I can say is that this debate and the relevant evidence have long been in the public domain, and Tamburrano's "facts" are nowhere near as clear-cut as he insists. Leake gives a very fair review of the state of the debate at the time of the writing of her book, and bases most of her argument on letters of 1928 and 1929 that nobody disputes. Even on Tamburrano's reading, Silone's position raises difficult issues.

Tamburrano also seems obsessed with Leake's supposed suggestion that Silone had a homosexual relationship with his Fascist minder. His letter gives the impression that this is the key

contention of Leake's book, and that I deliberately avoided mentioning it as too embarrassingly absurd. Yet, the one and only place where Leake discusses Silone's sexuality is in a footnote, which actually disputes this very view — propounded not by Leake but other scholars. The note concludes that "there is, to the best of my [Leake's] knowledge, no strong evidence that [Bellone and Silone's] relationship ever contained an erotic component". The sensationalism in this respect (such as the ten lines Tamburrano's letter has attracted in the *Corriere della sera* this week, which focuses exclusively on the homosexuality non-issue) is all of his own making. His interpretation of Leake certainly gives one little confidence in his ability to accurately read and report source material. For all this fuss, there is no gainsaying that Silone was a psychologically complex individual. By acknowledging this complexity, Leake adds depth to the novels.

Tamburrano portrays himself as a knight in shining armour, defending Silone from outrageous attacks. In reality, he is at best a Don Quixote tilting at the windmills of accusations that are largely of his own imagining, the product of exaggerating and distorting the arguments of his adversaries, at worst an intellectual stalker who has tried to hinder calm, academic discussion of this issue by pursuing all who raise opinions differing from his own with snide insinuations as to their motives and partial reporting of their actual views. Either way, his behaviour dishonours Ignazio Silone's memory.

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