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Liberty, Law and Totalitarianism. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński as an Interpreter of Benedetto Croce

Abstract

This article aims to highlight the intellectual synergy between Benedetto Croce and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, particularly in the field of the philosophy of law. Croce's influence on Herling-Grudziński's journalistic, literary, and philosophical work is reflected in the profound conviction that the *religion of liberty* will survive catastrophes and disasters, despite humanity's incessant attempts to suppress it. Throughout their lives, both Croce and Herling-Grudziński committed themselves to denouncing any order that, even if legally constituted, employed coercive means harmful to human dignity. As a signatory of the *Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals*, Croce vehemently condemned all forms of totalitarian power whose legislative activity degenerated into 'unbridled egoism or severity of command,' thereby assaulting the very idea of liberty as the insurmountable mode of individual existence. Following Croce's example, Herling-Grudziński proceeded to demonstrate the 'twinship' between the Nazi concentration camps (*lager*) and the Soviet forced labor camps (*gulag*). In the *gulag*, the horror is intolerably legalized, and the individual, deprived of his *conatus essendi* and every shred of dignity, becomes simply an "anonymous unit of energy". In that 'world apart,' where humanity is detached from history, civilization meets its end, marked by the advent of the Antichrist theorized by Croce: a vital and obscure dimension of action that is never ethicalized. Consequently, this article delves into Croce's critique of nihilist philosophy, described as a tendentious philosophy, since it reaches its climax in the complete approval of "evil". In a similar interpretive synthesis, Herling-Grudziński identifies the common nihilistic matrix underlying the totalitarianisms that ravaged the 20th century.

Keywords: A World Apart, Croce, Herling-Grudziński, liberty, law, totalitarianism

Sommario

Il presente articolo intende mettere in evidenza la profonda sintonia intellettuale tra Benedetto Croce e Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, con particolare attenzione all'ambito della filosofia del diritto. L'influenza di Croce sull'opera giornalistica, letteraria e filosofica di Herling-Grudziński si manifesta nella comune convinzione che la "religione della libertà" sia destinata a sopravvivere alle catastrofi e ai disastri della storia, malgrado i continui tentativi dell'umanità di soffocarla. Entrambi dedicano la propria vita a denunciare qualunque ordine politico che, pur essendo legalmente costituito, faccia ricorso a strumenti coercitivi lesivi della dignità dell'uomo. In quanto firmatario del *Manifesto degli intellettuali antifascisti*, Croce condanna con fermezza ogni forma di potere totalitario, la cui attività legislativa degenera in "sfrenato egoismo o durezza di comando", attaccando così l'idea stessa di libertà come modoinsuperabile dell'esistenza individuale. Sulla scia del pensiero crociano, Herling-Grudziński evidenzia il "gemellaggio" tra i campi di concentramento nazisti (*Lager*) e i campi di lavoro forzato sovietici (*Gulag*). Nel *Gulag*, l'orrore risulta perintollerabilmente legalizzato e l'individuo, privato del suo *conatus essendi* e di ogni frammento di dignità, è una semplice "unità anonima di energia". In quel "mondo a parte", in cui l'umanità è recisa dalla storia, la civiltà tocca il proprio limite estremo, segnato dall'avvento dell'Anticristo teorizzato da Croce: una dimensione vitale e oscura dell'agire umano che non trova mai compiuta eticizzazione. L'articolo approfondirà pertanto la critica crociana al nichilismo, definito "filosofia tendenziosa" in quanto approda all'accettazione integrale del "male con la coscienza interferente che esso è male". In un'analogia prospettiva interpretativa, Herling-Grudziński riconobbe la matrice nichilista comune ai totalitarismi che hanno devastato il Novecento.

Parole chiave: Un mondo a parte, Croce, Herling-Grudziński, libertà, diritto, totalitarismo

Introduction

In the complex weave of 20th-century European intellectual history, few thinkers rival the methodological rigor and far-sighted lucidity demonstrated by Benedetto Croce and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński in their profound analysis of the events that shaped that century. This essay aims to reinterpret Herling-Grudziński's work, deeply permeated by Croce's thought,

particularly where his reflection converges on cardinal concepts such as liberty, law, and the critique of totalitarianism. Herling's familiarity with Croce's philosophy is not a late acquisition; rather, it is rooted in his early education. As early as 1937, as a student of Polish Studies at the 'Józef Piłsudski' University of Warsaw, he delved into Croce's writings, encouraged by mentors like Fryde¹, a Polish critic and intellectual. In those years, Croce's works, especially his *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*², exerted an indelible influence on Herling-Grudziński's narrative, journalistic, and philosophical output, so much so that he contributed the afterword to its 1998 Polish edition. Herling-Grudziński himself recalls the depth of this impact in his inaugural lecture upon receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Poznań on May 20, 1991, on that occasion he recounted a meeting at Aleksander Hertz's home in late spring 1939, where a group of intellectuals, including Fryde, fervently discussed Croce's work:

I sat intimidated in a corner, trying not to miss a single word of what the illustrious guests were saying. [...] Of that discussion I can recall only faint fragments. Two in particular. Firstly, Croce's assertion that in the 19th century the religion of liberty blossomed, matured, and took root in Europe. Then, his profound conviction that attempts to eradicate it will not succeed, even if they are continually undertaken, bringing catastrophes and misfortunes³.

The events of the Second World War brought Herling-Grudziński to Italy toward the end of 1943. As a soldier under General Władysław Anders⁴, he found himself in Southern Italy shortly before the crucial Battle of Monte

¹ Ludwik Fryde (Warsaw 1912 – Płońsk 1942) studied law, and subsequently philosophy and Polish philology, at the University of Warsaw. His career as a critic quickly began. He was known for his rigorous approach and profound knowledge of both Polish and foreign literature.

² B. Croce, *Historia Europy w XIX wieku*, edited by Joanna Ugniewska, with an introduction by Bronisław Geremek, afterword by G. Herling, Warsaw 1998. The first Italian edition, *Storia d'Europa nel secolo decimonono*, was published by Laterza, Bari-Rome, in 1932. The first English translation, *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, was edited by H. Furs, New York 1933. In this work, Croce analyzes 19th-century European history through his unique philosophical lens. It is not a history in the traditional chronological sense but rather an interpretation of the events and trends that shaped Europe during that period, with particular attention to the role of culture and thought. For the preparation of these pages, reference will be made to the 1933 English version.

³ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Być i pisać* (1997). Traduzione italiana: *Essere e scrivere*, a cura di Marta Herling, in *Il pellegrino della libertà*, Napoli 2006, pp. 123–124.

⁴ G. Herling, J. Czapski, *Dialog o Dowódcy*, "Kultura," IV, 1970, pp. 15–25: "We were an army of prisoners, commanded by a prisoner and rebuilt with the resistant consent of the prison guards". Traduzione italiana: R. Panzone: *Dialogo intorno al Capo, il generale Władysław Anders, in occasione della sua scomparsa*, in "Poloniaeuropa," no. 1, 2010.

Cassino. After recovering from typhoid fever in the British military hospital in Nocera, he had to spend a period of convalescence in Sorrento. In March 1944, due to the circumstances, he managed to meet Croce personally. He describes the intimate and profound account of that moment in his essay *Villa Tritone: A Wartime Interlude in Italy*:

The Tritone Villa was not Croce's home; after the Allied invasion of Italy, the elderly philosopher, fearing Fascist reprisals, had been transferred first to Capri and then to Sorrento. His true home was Naples. At the first floor of a building near the Calata Trinità Maggiore, an opaque plaque bearing the stylized initials B.C. [...] The conversation revolved around the September campaign, Germany, and Russia. Croce was kind; he inquired with interest about many details, expressing sincere sympathy for Poland and the Poles. When the topic of the war was exhausted and they moved on to other subjects, it was not surprising that the great Italian Hegelian's lips mentioned the name of Cieszkowski several times. Croce was pleased that his philosophy was gaining interest in Poland and listened with interest to my account of the polemics that his aesthetics had provoked in our country⁵.

Croce also noted the event in his diary, mentioning "a soldier from the Polish detachment [...], a philosophy scholar, a reader of my volumes translated into German, belonging to a group of my philosophy enthusiasts in Warsaw, who wants to translate my books into Polish"⁶. Croce was profoundly impressed by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's intellectual acumen and his keen interest in philosophy. However, what most captures his attention is Herling-Grudziński's direct testimony of the totalizing evil inflicted by the Soviet regime, which Herling-Grudziński himself had endured. It must be reiterated that when Herling-Grudziński met Croce, his life had already been indelibly marked by such suffering, an experience that not only drastically affected his existence but also defines his intellectual identity⁷.

⁵ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Willa Tritone. Interludium wojenne we Włoszech*, "Wiadomości", XXX, 1951. G. Herling, *Villa Tritone. Interludio bellico in Italia*, a cura di V. Verdiani, in *Etica e letteratura. Testimonianze, diario, racconti*, Milano 2019, pp. 1109–1126.

⁶ B. Croce, *Quando l'Italia era tagliata in due. Estratto di un diario (luglio 1943-giugno 1944)*, Bari 1948; now in: *Taccuini di guerra 1943–1945*, Milano 2004, p. 107.

⁷ Arrested in March 1940, Herling-Grudziński is transferred to various prisons – Grodno, Vitebsk, Leningrad – before ending up in the Ercevo prison camp, on the White Sea. These places of "imprisonment and martyrdom" are vividly recounted in his most significant work, *A World Apart* (published in 1951). Only in March 1942 does Gustaw Herling-Grudziński regain his freedom, thanks to the amnesty granted to Polish prisoners under the Sikorski-Maysky agreement. Still clothed in the rags that identified him as a former gulag prisoner, the young Herling-Grudziński

The Influence of Croce's *Religion of Liberty* in Herling-Grudziński's Thought

Recognizing the authenticity and cultural relevance of Herling-Grudziński's testimony, Croce chose to establish a vibrant and lasting intellectual dialogue with the Polish writer, fueled by their shared quest for values that could guide human action toward a universal morality. During his stay in Sorrento, Herling-Grudziński had the opportunity to frequently visit Croce's residence. Evenings at Villa Tritone, spent in lively and intense cultural debates, nurtured Herling-Grudziński's intellectual desire to write about Poland. Croce persuaded him to draft an article for the monthly journal "Aretusa." Titled *Guida essenziale della Polonia per buoni europei*, the essay appears in 1944 in the second issue of the journal, directed by Elena Croce and Francesco Flora, and was later reissued in 1946 in *Iridion*, an Italian-language periodical of the Second Corps edited by Włodzimierz Sznarbachowski. In this contribution, Herling-Grudziński lucidly delineates Poland's historical, political, and cultural identity, embedding it within the broader European context. The main point of the argument lies in his clear premonition of the extreme gravity of Soviet political action, whose totalitarian features were still largely unknown. However, Herling-Grudziński's dramatic denunciation was not embraced by the intellectuals of the time, who remained strongly pro-Soviet, to the extent that he himself highlighted how that article:

it convinced almost no one. In return, I received a great honor: after the article was published, I was briefly summoned by Croce himself, who declared that he was on my side. The old Italian liberal saw and knew too many things to yield to the prevailing fashion in Italy at the time of the Anglo-Soviet-American "holy alliance"⁸.

Croce's reaction did not particularly surprise the young Herling-Grudziński. Through his reading of the *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, he assimilates and embraces the principles of the *religion of liberty* advocated by the Italian philosopher. This fundamental work, published

embarked on a long and difficult journey, crossing Kazakhstan, then continuing through Iran, Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt. His destination is military training in the Polish army, a force established by General Anders under British command. For further reading, I recommend: M. Herling, "La religione della libertà" di Croce nella biografia di Gustaw Herling in "pl.it / Rassegna italiana di argomenti polacchi", X, 2019, pp. 80–92.

⁸ G. Herling, *Etica e letteratura. Testimonianza, diario e racconti*, p. 1118.

by Croce in 1932, offers a detailed and rigorous analysis of the spiritual crisis that had characterized the early 20th century. The book can rightly be interpreted as a warning, an attempt by Croce to restore the “sanity” of intellectual and moral life, which is severely compromised by philosophical orientations he considers reductive and historically decontextualized. Among these, Croce includes Actualism, Marxism, Heideggerianism, and Nihilism, views as speculations that, due to their ahistorical nature, trigger a process of decadence, sometimes perceived as irreversible. Croce, thus, observes a growing diffusion of a sentiment intrinsically adverse to liberalism (in its philosophical sense) within Europe. Such activism, in his view, has stripped liberty of its moral spirit and heroism of its purity of purpose. His condemnation is firm when he asserts that:

Activism is developing with the same impulsiveness, and even with greater vehemence. The nationalist and imperialist outbursts inflame the victorious nations because they are victorious and the vanquished nations because they are vanquished. The new states that have arisen add new nationalisms and new imperialisms. The impatience for liberal institutions has given rise to open or masked dictatorships, and to the desire for dictatorships everywhere. Liberty, which before the war is a static faith or a practice with scant faith, falls from the minds of men even where it has not fallen from their institutions, and is replaced by activist libertarianism, which more than ever dreams of wars and upheavals and destruction, and bursts out into disordered movements and plans showy and arid works [...] Communism, which under the name of socialism has been inoculated into the life of politics and the state and into the course of history, has appeared once more in its scission and crudity, another bitter enemy of liberalism, which it derides and ingenuously calls moralistic⁹.

These significant expressions powerfully reveal the depth of a philosophical reflection aimed at unmasking the contradictions of certain orientations, which orchestrated dangerous mystifying propaganda regarding the very concept of liberty. Croce articulates a fierce condemnation of regimes that, through nationalistic and sensationalistic impulses, increasingly and vehemently resort to violence. From this perspective, the authoritarianism prevalent in Europe after the First World War appears to Croce as a form of resurgent and radical Jacobinism founded entirely on abstract economics and abstract political force, where the simplified man replaces the historical man.

⁹ B. Croce, *History of Europe in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 353.

Within this intellectual framework, the use of force no longer seemed dictated by contingency that is, by historical necessity; force, in Croce's eyes, becomes the generator of history itself. Force thus supersedes liberty. Aiming to promote the foundational principles of a liberal conception and to re-establish the bases of civilization, Croce seeks to clarify that:

Communism, of which it is usually said that it has entered the reality of facts and been effectuated in Russia, is by no means been effectuated as communism, but in the manner indicated by its critics and permitted by its internal contradiction, that is, as a form of autocracy, which has deprived the Russian people of what little mental movement and liberty they enjoyed or obtained under the preceding Czarist autocracy¹⁰.

In the wake of these incisive, albeit summary, premises, it seems appropriate to clarify, for the sake of a broader understanding of what is being argued, that Croce clearly distances himself from any manifestation of despotic and self-referential power in his lecture *Antistoricismo*, given in Oxford in 1930 at the Seventh International Congress of Philosophy. It is here that Croce lays the foundations for the speculation that characterises his intellectual journey, revisiting and deepening – in more intense and radical tones – the analysis of the progressive eclipse of liberty that he had already outlined between 1926 and 1927, particularly in the tenth chapter of his *Storia d' Italia dal 1871 al 1915*¹¹. The arguments put forward here, as is well known, are also repeated in the subsequent *History of Europe*.

The reactions provoked by the tenor of Croce's argumentation were extensive and varied, manifesting both internationally – with echoes in England and Germany – and, above all, in Fascist Italy. Croce himself meticulously documented this impact through a valuable collection of pamphlets, article clippings, photographs, brief notes, and reports, preserved in the private archive of Benedetto Croce, housed by the Benedetto Croce Library Foundation at Palazzo Filomarino. The *Miscellanea degli scritti di Benedetto Croce* is composed of 90 volumes, of which 3 – volumes 42, 49 and 50 – are specifically dedicated to the Oxford discourse. It goes without saying that the most biting and incisive criticism came from Giovanni Gentile¹²,

¹⁰ B. Croce, *op. cit.*, p. 356.

¹¹ Cfr. B. Croce, *Storia d'Italia dal 1871 al 1915*, Bari 1928.

¹² Giovanni Gentile (Castelvetro, May 29, 1875 – Florence, April 15, 1944) was a prominent figure in 20th-century Italian philosophical, pedagogical, and political circles. His work falls within the Italian neo-idealism movement, where he stood as its foremost exponent alongside Benedetto Croce, contributing significantly to the cultural discourse of the era. Initially, Gentile was a close

who, after carefully reading the conference text published in the journal *La Critica*, sarcastically commented on it on two distinct occasions: in his inaugural address at the National Fascist Institute of Culture, delivered on December 5, 1930, and later published in *Educazione fascista* under the title *La formazione politica della coscienza nazionale*, and in the article *Buffonate antifasciste* published in January 1931. Gentile's harsh reaction is emblematic for framing the cultural impact of Croce's lucid and incisive denunciation of any system that bases its legitimacy on terror and fear. Croce's perspective is clear and leaves no room for doubt: antihistoricism corresponds to a mental impoverishment or moral weakness that pervades the human spirit, now annihilated by progressive ideological instances – a crisis not exclusively confined to the political sphere, but one that appeared radical and invasive.

Together with antihistoricism – states Croce – it is observed, and intrinsically forms a unity with it: the decadence of the liberal ideal, which in some countries has also resulted in the formation of illiberal regimes, but which is noted almost everywhere in words and deeds, in books and political methods, and even more in restless desires. Historical sentiment and liberal sentiment are, in truth, inseparable, so much so that no better definition of history can be given than that of “history of liberty,” because only from this does it obtain meaning and only through it does it become intelligible. Undoubtedly – continues Croce – in history one also sees theocratic and authoritarian regimes, regimes of violence and reactions and counter-reforms and dictatorships and tyrannies; but what alone and always re-emerges and develops and grows is liberty, which, now in those various forms fashions its means, now bends them to its instruments, now uses its apparent defeats as stimuli for its own life¹³.

collaborator and co-founder of “*La Critica. Rivista di letteratura, storia e filosofia*”, a journal directed by Benedetto Croce from 1903 to 1944. In this early phase, Gentile's contributions were crucial to the journal's philosophical direction. However, progressive philosophical divergences between Croce and Gentile eventually led to a rupture. While Croce maintained a position rooted in an idealistic and anti-metaphysical historicism, Gentile fully developed his actualism. Adding to these philosophical disagreements were profound political differences, with Gentile's embrace of fascism contrasting sharply with Croce's growing anti-fascist opposition. This discord culminated in Gentile ceasing his collaboration with “*La Critica. Rivista di letteratura, storia e filosofia*” in 1923. Gentile subsequently founded his own journal, “*Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*” (1920–1946), which became the primary vehicle for disseminating his actualist thought.

¹³ B. Croce, *Antistoricismo*, in “*La Critica. Rivista di letteratura, storia e filosofia*”, XXVIII, 1930, pp. 276–284.

Considering these key reflections, it is evident that the decadence of the liberal idea occurs when an idea of force prevails, superseding the very concept of morality. Liberty, according to the interpretation by Croce, represents the authentic expression of the human spirit. It follows that any legal or political action must be oriented toward a single purpose: to promote and defend liberty, both in oneself and in others. Following this rigorous speculative approach, Croce arrives at a radical revision of the concept of justice. In an excerpt titled *Revisione filosofica dei concetti di "Libertà" e "Giustizia"*, which appeared in his journal in 1943, he argues that the concept of justice cannot be disjoined from that of liberty, since:

A consequence of the principle thus established is that, since liberty fully coincides with morality and encompasses every moral duty, there is no task of that quality that it does not reach and that remains outside its sphere, as if inviting another spiritual power to assume and execute it; for, whatever would this other power be, if liberty embraces the whole and is the whole? And this is the reason why I cannot manage to tolerate – I repeat, logically, and not for its sentimental motives – that companionship that one wishes to give it, of another idea, designated by the name of Justice, its corrector or integrator, its friend or its superior, or its emulator and rival, with which it sometimes quarrels and, for better or for worse, compromises and accommodates itself. No: liberty has no need of this because everything that is to be done morally, it does and must do by itself, drawing it from itself, and never finding any other force outside itself¹⁴.

Croce harshly criticizes the materialistic interpretation of justice, which equates it with the equal well-being of all and the equal capacity of all for everything.

The radical, utopian abolition of economic diversities and political hierarchy, which was the dream that arose from that logical error – and to which, in practice, as has been said, nothing could correspond but failure or an outcome contrary to expectation – was attempted by Jacobinism and, more directly, by Babeuf's Jacobin "Conspiracy of Equals", to which also traces the widely resonant, yet intellectually elusive, formula of *de facto* liberty, to be realized after the achievement of "formal liberty" of "social equality" in substitution for "equality before the law"¹⁵.

¹⁴ B. Croce, *Revisione filosofica dei concetti di "Libertà" e "Giustizia"*, in "La Critica. Rivista di letteratura, storia e filosofia", XLI, 1943, p. 277.

¹⁵ B. Croce, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

This stance, which elevates liberty to a supreme ethical and political principle while reducing justice to its intrinsic manifestation, was widely received, and discussed, eliciting discordant reactions among scholars of the time. It must also be noted that Croce's thought stands in clear opposition to the totalitarian tendencies of certain doctrines that promise 'social justice' by sacrificing individual liberties, anticipating insights later developed by authoritative intellectuals. His aversion to egalitarian utopia reflects a deep distrust of political projects that, in pursuing an ideal of uniformity, risk annihilating the typically human creative dimension. Croce was thus considered the preeminent representative of the liberal ideal, guardian of a spiritual matrix in which European civilization finds its recognition. In an analogous interpretive synthesis, Herling-Grudziński highlights that the ideological propaganda promoted by Russia, having its roots in the Enlightenment and European rationalism, was, for a long time, a political phenomenon difficult to counteract.

The judgment starts from the premise that communism is not a national and racial utopia, but a social utopia. Therefore, the Soviets, as the architects of this utopia's realization, somehow must be granted the right to commit "errors": initially, their choice is justifiable; it is a matter of realizing the social utopia¹⁶.

It is paradoxical, Herling-Grudziński argues, to aspire to an ideal of a classless and stateless society that denies the individual the most basic freedom: to speak and express dissent against a legality not aimed at respecting human dignity. Herling-Grudziński, having personally experienced the tragedy of the Gulags, with exemplary intellectual lucidity, demolishes the rhetoric of "necessary evil" justified by the goal of social utopia. Croce's intuitions confirm Herling-Grudziński's reflection, where he makes a significant critique of those philosophical systems that often do not seek the truth of facts at all, but rather construct abstract arguments concerned only with conferring logical coherence on their reasoning.

The End of Civilization in Herling-Grudziński's *A World Apart*

To make accessible to the Polish public, and more generally to the exiled community, a thought that would constitute a strong and authoritative

¹⁶ G. Herling, *Variazioni sulle tenebre*, a cura di Stefano De Matteis, Roma 2022, p. 277.

alternative to totalitarianism, Herling-Grudziński decided to publish the Polish translation of Croce's work, *The End of Civilization* (*Zmierzch cywilizacji*), in the journal *Kultura*¹⁷. *Kultura* represented the most important cultural tool used by opponents of communist ideology in the post-war period who were committed to supporting a free Polish identity. After the war, Herling-Grudziński, like many other intellectuals, directed his reflection toward interpretive frameworks capable of explaining the extent of the catastrophe they had just experienced and the unprecedented, not-so-hidden threats that the future held.

This hermeneutic movement finds vital nourishment precisely in Croce's essay, which offers a remarkable philosophical perspective for developing an authentic reflection aimed at tracing the causes of the radical barbarization of the European politico-cultural sphere. It is important to note that for Croce, the "end of civilization" does not translate into an apocalyptic prediction of physical or material destruction. On the contrary, it is considered as a profound crisis, inextricably linked to the corruption of the ethical and aesthetic categories that defined *humanitas*. It delineates the decay of the moral consciousness and critical capacity of the liberal civilization that Croce had theorized and defended. In this sense, his analysis distinguishes itself from deterministic or providentialistic visions of history, maintaining a firm faith in human liberty and responsibility.

The end of civilization of which we speak, of civilization universally, is not the elevation but the rupture of tradition, the establishment of barbarism, and it takes place when the lower and barbaric spirits, which, although held in check, are present in every civil society, regain vigor and, ultimately, preponderance and dominion. Then these spirits, incapable of resolving the existing civilization within themselves by raising it to a greater and better power, undermine it, and not only overcome and oppress the men who represent it, but turn to undoing the works that were instruments for their own further works, and they destroy monuments of beauty, systems of thought, all the testimonies of the noble past, closing schools, scattering or burning museums, libraries, and archives, and doing other similar things, as has been seen and is still being seen, whether this

¹⁷ In 1946, Jerzy Giedroyc founded the Instytut Literacki (Literary Institute), a significant publishing institution. Among its early publications was Adam Mickiewicz's *The Books of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrimage*, featuring a preface by Gustaw Herling. Within the Instytut Literacki, Herling played a central role in editing the journal "Kultura". The first issue of this influential publication appeared in Rome in April 1947, including texts by Paul Valéry (from 1919) and Benedetto Croce (from 1946). Herling actively contributed to the journal, with a brief interruption between 1948 and 1956, and continued his collaboration until 1995.

occurs through ignorance and carelessness, or through a cheerful spirit of destruction, or through deliberate intent¹⁸.

In 1946, the same year Croce oversaw the publication of *The End of Civilization* in *Quaderni della Critica*, he was also working on his *Antichrist*. Both works, though with distinct titles, reflected the profound disquiet of the philosopher in the face of a reality passively resigned to the meaninglessness of life. Furthermore, for Croce, the *Antichrist* does not hold a theological or eschatological significance. It does not refer to a superhuman or demonic figure, nor to a principle of metaphysical evil. Rather, the *Antichrist* is a powerful metaphor for indicating the negation or perversion of the ethical and spiritual principles that are intrinsic to humanity and that constituted the foundation of its humanity and civilization itself.

This is truly the Antichrist, opposed to Christ: the Antichrist, destroyer of the world, rejoicing in destruction, heedless of not being able to construct anything other than the perpetually more dizzying process of this destruction itself, the negative that wishes to behave as a positive and be as such no longer creation but, if one could so put it, de-creation¹⁹.

Through this interpretation, Croce sharply distances himself semantically from the nihilistic current, numbering it among those tendentious philosophies that catalyze the emergence of absolute and totalizing ideologies. Such ideologies, in his view, located the meaning of human existence in the satisfaction of primordial instincts, responded to a desire for mere prevarication and self-affirmation through the exclusion of alterity. This correlation was not accidental but derived from his profound understanding of the nature of spirit and history. For Croce, nihilism is not simply one philosophical current among many, but a veritable disease of the spirit, a radical negation of the possibility of truth, ethical values, and rationality itself. In this perspective, Croce equates the *Antichrist* with that dimension of the vital – that dark side of doing – which never ethicizes itself and always re-emerges with a lust for power. Moreover, the idea of liberty that stems from Croce's reflection is certainly not reconcilable with that of Nietzsche and his will to power, which is situated beyond good and evil and considers morality a superstructure, a lie that paralyzes action. Croce's liberty is

¹⁸ B. Croce, *La fine della civiltà* in "Quaderni della Critica", Vol. II, n.6, 1946, p. 2. Now in: B. CROCE, *La fine della civiltà. L'anticristo che è in noi*, Brescia 2022.

¹⁹ B. Croce, *L'anticristo che è in noi* in "Quaderni della Critica", Vol. III, n.8, 1947, p. 67.

one that expressed itself in the authentic dynamics of human existence. And the action of the human, for Croce, always tends toward the universal, not allowing itself to be overwhelmed by contingency. Croce sharply criticizes the essence of a tendentious philosophy that culminates in the total approval of evil and non-resistance to it, interpreted as one of the possible faces of good. He denounces the totalitarian drifts that such a doctrine carries with it when he noted that “faith in liberty has been challenged and shaken... The affirmation of the strongest took precedence”.

And it is precisely in Herling-Grudziński’s *A World Apart*²⁰, where humanity is detached from history, that the end of civilization unfolds, now marked by the advent of Croce’s *Antichrist*, which manifests as the “disavowal, negation, outrage, derision of values themselves, declared empty words, fabrications or even worse, hypocritical deceptions, which more easily than not pass off, in the dazzled eyes of the credulous and the foolish, as the only reality, that is, personal greed and desire directed entirely towards pleasure and comfort”. In *A World Apart*, every individual, deprived of *conatus essendi*, is treated as an object, in a condition that can be defined as minority²¹ in a Kantian logic. This state is a systematic and forced deprivation of the capacity for rational self-determination, a denial of the moral foundation upon which Croce builds his concept of freedom. In the prison camp,

²⁰ It is almost unnecessary to reiterate that Herling’s denunciation of Soviet atrocities in *A World Apart* led to his forty-year ostracism from his homeland, Poland. The original Polish version of *A World Apart* was clandestinely circulated in London in 1953 and in Paris in 1965. In 1980, during the so-called “sixteen months of *Solidarność*,” it was finally published uncensored in Poland. However, just a year later, following the coup d’état of December 13, 1981, it was banned again. It was only in 1989 that it was republished and began circulating freely once more. *A World Apart* was translated into English and published in London in 1951, with an introduction by Bertrand Russell. The work garnered widespread acclaim. However, its dissemination in Italy and France had a different fate. In Italy, it was published by Laterza in 1958, translated by Gaspare Magi, a pseudonym for Lidia Croce and Antonia Maresca. Herling recalled that Laterza, Croce’s publisher, printed it reluctantly, almost out of a “family obligation,” so to speak. From the documentary sources preserved in the invaluable Herling Archive at the Italian Institute for Historical Studies, it emerges that Albert Camus, in 1956, actively worked to have *A World Apart* published in France by his publisher, Gallimard. Despite Camus’s intervention, the publishing house decided not to proceed with publication “pour des raisons commerciales” (for commercial reasons). It was only translated into French in 1985. The bond between Herling and Camus is particularly noteworthy, characterized by profound mutual respect. Herling never stopped reading Camus, and Camus, struck by the Polish writer’s raw description of Soviet horrors in *A World Apart*, intensified his ongoing polemic with Sartre. Reference is made to the English edition: G. Herling, *A World Apart: A Memoir of the Gulag*, trans. by J. Marek, London 1951. The original Polish edition is Id., *Inny świat. Zapiski sowieckie*, London 1953. For the most recent Italian edition, see *Un mondo a parte*, Milano 2017, now included in G. Herling, *Etica e letteratura. Testimonianze, diario, racconti*, Milano 2019

²¹ I. Kant, *Stato di diritto e società civile*, a cura di Nicolao Merker, Roma 2015.

there is passive and unconditional obedience to a tyrannical hierarchical order. This order is successfully “only when all criteria, all standards of comparison which apply at liberty, have been completely obliterated from the prisoner’s mind and memory”, could he be fully induced to conceive of his state of imprisonment not as an anomaly but as normality.

Herling-Grudziński, with his raw narration of the tortures inflicted on prisoners, subjected to a condition of “concentrationary civilization”, makes us participate in a pain that annihilates all hope and devalues subjectivities, stripped of their dignity, to a biological state. Here, evil is absolute, and cruelty is “legally” organized.

The inhuman thoughtlessness of Soviet labour camp legislation has created a situation in which a prisoner who drops dead at his work from exhaustion is just a nameless unit of energy, which with one stroke of the pencil is eliminated from the plan of production, while a prisoner wounded at work is a damaged machine, sent off for repairs as soon as possible²².

Herling-Grudziński portrays a world with its own laws, its own customs, where people lived in a state of perennial despair. In these pages, the interpreter confronts the horror of the absurd. Significant is the passage where Herling-Grudziński recounts the emotions he experienced upon learning of his release. Having received the news, he cannot feel joy or relief. Guilt overwhelms him, leading to a bitter and profound realization: “there is no suffering in this world greater than to experience happiness before the unhappy, to eat in front of the hungry”²³. His thoughts turn to his comrades. Now spiritually disintegrated, they place their last hopes in death, weary of fighting for an ephemeral survival that negated the memory of their existence.

Soviet prisoners have been deprived even of hope, for not one of them can ever know with any certainty when his sentence will come to an end. He can re-

²² G. Herling-Grudziński, *A World Apart*, p. 18. See also S. De Matteis, *Per non dimenticare «gli occhi asciutti degli adulti dei colpevoli»* in Andrea F. De Carlo e Marta Herling, *Gustaw Herling e il suo mondo. La storia, il coraggio civile e la libertà di scrivere*, Roma 2022, p. 183: “In his long testimony-struggle against evil, to which he dedicated his entire life, Herling-Grudziński argues in his usual essential and necessary style that one must first and foremost remember and recount, narrate and make known. This is not out of a subjective and personal desire or a narcissistic calling to write. Rather, it’s because when facts and events are reported, one speaks not only about others and their contexts, about abuses and the evil of history, but also for others.”

²³ G. Herling, *A World Apart*, p. 228.

member literally hundreds of cases where sentences have been prolonged by another ten years with one stroke of a pen at the Special Council of the N.K.V.D in Moscow²⁴.

In the Ercevo prison camp, there is passive and unconditional obedience to intolerably unjust but formally legal laws.

In the days of my *A World Apart* or Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the tormentors in the camps are executors of the will of an omnipotent and vengeful demiurge, with prisoners as mere slaves offered as sacrifice at his altar. It is an immutable reality, an irreversible destiny: it left no room for hesitation among the oppressors, nor for the thoughts of rebellion among the oppressed. Schlomer describes the revolt in the Vorkuta camp in the aftermath of Stalin's death. It is the day of the birth of a new Soviet prisoner, a free slave²⁵.

Considering the scope and complexity of the issues addressed, Herling-Grudziński's narrative disrupted the intellectual landscape of Italy, still deeply scarred by the wounds of war and the political East-West dialectic. Its reception was primarily among intellectual and academic circles, particularly among those who were critical of Communism or sought a deeper understanding of the tragedies of totalitarianism. Intellectuals like Ignazio Silone²⁶, who wrote the preface for the 1958 Italian edition, immediately grasped its moral and historical significance, recognizing it as a fundamental document for deconstructing the Soviet myth and addressing the

²⁴ G. Herling-Grudziński, *A World Apart*, p. 32

²⁵ G. Herling, *L'opposizione fra i reticolati in Scritti Italiani 1944–2000*. Volume I, a cura di M. Śniedziewska, Napoli 2022, p. 561. A crucial initiative for scholars of Gustaw Herling-Grudziński is the complete compilation and reorganization of all his Italian-language writings. This impressive work was curated by Marta Herling and Magdalena Śniedziewska. Currently, this collection is available in typescript format and is preserved at the library of the Italian Institute for Historical Studies in Naples. This Neapolitan institute serves as an irreplaceable resource, offering unique access not only to a vast amount of study material related to Herling-Grudziński but also to a valuable testament to his profound thought and rich life.

²⁶ Ignazio Silone (Pescina dei Marsi, Italy, 1900 – Geneva, Switzerland, 1978) was a significant Italian writer, journalist, and politician. From 1956, together with Nicola Chiaromonte, he founded and directed the journal "Tempo Presente," an important point of reference for Italian and international cultural debate. The collaboration between Silone and Herling on "Tempo Presente" symbolizes a convergence of intellectual and moral paths. Both, although coming from different contexts (Silone from Italian anti-fascism and criticism of post-Stalinist communism, Herling from direct experience in the gulag), were united by shared liberal values, an uncompromising critique of all forms of tyranny, and a belief in the importance of individual testimony and freedom of conscience. In this regard, Herling recalls in *Etica e letteratura. Testimonianze, diario, racconti*, p. 479: "I met Silone, as well as Chiaromonte, at the end of 1955. They proposed that I write for "Tempo Presente", which

question of individual liberty in the face of oppressive regimes. Its publication helped to break a certain silence or, at least, to challenge the predominant narratives regarding the Eastern Bloc, offering a direct perspective on the reality of forced labor camps. A perspective that contributed to forming a critical consciousness in a part of the Italian intelligentsia, fueling the debate on human rights, the nature of authoritarian regimes, and the necessity of preserving historical truth. An authentic truth that dismissed all forms of political pretense and confronted the reader with evil.

Conclusions

The theme of evil recurs frequently throughout Herling-Grudziński's works – an evil that characterizes the 20th century, an era deprived of those values that imbued thought with hope. Herling-Grudziński endeavored to seek the reasons for that evil, personally endured, to re-establish the ethical order that totalitarianism had severely undermined. His reflection aims to draw a well-defined theoretical furrow: to assign meaning to the brutal experience of Ercevo and not to be defeated by the consequences of exile. Herling-Grudziński, on the long journey undertaken to achieve freedom, is simply a pilgrim of hope, and his sole mission is to educate humanity in solidarity, the genealogical principle that upheld the world. He thus denounces destructive and totalizing ideologies, founded on terror and fear, which ultimately annihilate humanity, forced to endure the brutal and vulgar force masterfully described by Simone Weil. The exiled writer's condemnation is total. Herling-Grudziński, having personally experienced the absurdity that suddenly descends upon human life, paraphrasing Camus, recounts existences interrupted by contingent laws, expressions of the will of the strongest. Exemplarily, he warns that:

Ideology leaves no liberty either to the individual or to society as a whole, which must conform to a pre-established model. Those who deviate have no right to live in society. From this point of view, ideology is terrible, because it develops a tendency towards evil²⁷.

they had just founded [...] But back then, in that atmosphere of intellectual conformism, bad faith, disinformation, and moral torpor, the issues of "Tempo Presente" were usually met with hostility, if not aversion and gnashing of teeth, accompanied by the usual stupid label of a Cold War product".

²⁷ G. Herling, *Variazioni sulle tenebre*, p. 367.

In this *mare magnum* of ideological absurdities, liberty, the defining characteristic of human creativity, is stifled, annihilated by the advent of those totalitarianisms, which were the architects of unacceptable injustices. If we consider law in its phenomenological sense that is, as a hypothesis of norms for hypothetical behaviors always oriented toward respecting the liberty of others, a principle rooted in the rational *a priori* of Kantian ethics and jurisprudence, it becomes emblematic that this interpretation of the legal phenomenon had been completely discarded by totalitarian regimes. Croce, the initiator of a religion dedicated to liberty, and the author of the *Manifesto of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals*, strived to oppose any system, even if legally established, whose legislative activity devolves into crude imposition, thus threatening the very idea of liberty, understood as the insurmountable way of being of the individual. Both Croce and Herling-Grudziński radically oppose every form of arbitrary, self-referential power not oriented toward respecting a principle of substantive equality that acknowledges alterity while respecting its difference. Influenced by Croce's convictions, Herling-Grudziński demonstrates the twin nature shared by the *lager* and the *gulag*. This insight, far beyond mere historical comparison, reveals a profound understanding of totalitarian dynamics, which were founded on control and repression. Such a perspective echoes Croce's position, for whom totalitarianism, in all its forms, represents a pathology of history and spirit, a regression toward barbarism that denied the autonomy of morality and politics. Based on what has been argued so far, it is evident that both Herling-Grudziński and Croce converge in recognizing the intrinsically antithetical nature of authoritarian systems compared to the foundational values of European civilization.

From 1825 onwards – Herling-Grudziński observes – the struggle for freedom in Russia followed autocratic power like an inseparable shadow. The famous extremism of Russian revolutionaries is merely an extreme reaction to the extreme oppression of the tsars. The resurgence of state terror increased the desperate violence of terrorism – how desperate and tormented Camus recounts in *The Rebel* – by the hand of bombs or pistols for the assailants (...) Under Stalin, Herling-Grudziński continues, political opposition is silenced and decimated. The apparatus of terror becomes so omnipotent as to render even the most cautious and timid reservations about the regime irreprehensible²⁸.

²⁸ G. Herling, *I clandestini russi della libertà*, in *Scritti Italiani 1944–2000*. Vol. 1, a cura di Magdalena Śniedziewska, p. 594.

Herling-Grudziński, in fully embracing Croce's speculation, is guided by a theoretical imperative: no man can ever discern between good and evil if he is deprived of his freedom. Herling-Grudziński, however, does not succumb to despair; he glimpses hope. Man can and must rebel against totalitarian ideologies that violate fundamental rights. In a similar interpretive synthesis with Croce's thought, he conceives of liberty as the engine and purpose of history, condemning every form of violence that, despite originating from instances of freedom, ultimately betrays itself in the establishment of new despotisms. In this sense, Herling-Grudziński does not allow himself to be defeated by the meaninglessness of life professed by new nihilisms. He did not accept the label of exile but asserted his status as a pilgrim of freedom. Following Croce's *lectio*, he considers force the great illness of Europe: "it is all a matter of blood" – Herling-Grudziński stated – "which is the only seal of conquest". Ultimately, the comparison proposed here between Croce's thought and Herling-Grudziński's work is not a mere exercise in intellectual philology but constitutes an essential contribution to an authentic understanding of the deep roots of the European crisis of the 20th century and its possible responses. Their shared aversion to egalitarian utopias and strenuous defense of liberty do not represent an echo of an anachronistic liberalism, but rather a perennial warning. In an era that continues to confront new forms of ideological and technological enslavement, the lesson of Croce and Herling-Grudziński's testimony resonates with a prophetic force: only in safeguarding individual liberty and in constant vigilance against every form of absolutism can human dignity be cultivated and civilization preserved. Their legacy compels us to recognize that liberty is never a given, but a daily conquest, the only true possible justice for the spirit. The contemporary relevance of the ideological encounter between these two giants of thought continues to fuel contemporary debate and is a subject of study and comparison among scholars committed to reinterpreting cultural relations between Italy and Poland in the 20th century.

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