

Bagpipe music

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Abstract Ancient philosophy is in a bad way. Like all other academic disciplines, it is crushed by the embrace of bureaucracy. Like other parts of philosophy, it is infected by faddishness. And in addition it suffers cruelly from the decline in classical philology. There is no cure for this disease.

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“Won’t you write a manifesto,” the editor asked, “on the future of ancient philosophy?” “And why not make it,” he added, “highly speculative and ambitious?” Well, manifestos are for young optimists, and I am an antique pessimist. What’s more, I’ve never had enough imagination to speculate, and my remaining ambitions look to the garden rather than to the academy. So here instead is a little bagpipe music.

Before the familiar drone begins, three warning notes should be sounded.

First, I can only talk about what is quaintly called “ancient philosophy,” i.e., about Act One of the history of philosophy. I don’t know to what extent my remarks hold good in other parts of the wood.

Secondly, for the last decade I’ve been working in French-speaking Europe. I don’t know, except at second-hand or by inference, what things are like in America or Australia or Antarctica.

Thirdly, I shall say nothing about one half—and in most cases by far the more important half—of any

ancient philosopher’s activities; for I shall say nothing at all about teaching.

Oh, there’s a fourth warning note: I am becoming—or so my wife tells me—increasingly crabbed and crotchety and contrary and cantankerous and curmudgeonly. *O les beaux jours. Où sont les neiges d’antan?* In the past, even the future was brighter. Fings ain’t what they used to be—they never were. Paul Ziff once said that if you couldn’t see any aesthetic merit in an object, then—whatever the object might be—that was your fault. He toured the garbage-tips of Florida to test his theory, and claimed that it passed the test. I could never quite believe him; but it must at any rate be true that aesthetic merit depends at least as much on the observer as on the observed. So too intellectual merit.

Q: Where is ancient philosophy going now?—*A:* Downhill, and to the dogs. *Q:* Where will it go in the future?—*A:* Further downhill, and right past the dogs. *Q:* What can be done?—*A:* Not much. *Q:* What will be done?—*A:* Nothing.

Facilis descensus Averno. But in addition to the natural propensity of things to descend, there are three principal reasons for the decline in ancient philosophy. The chief and the most obvious of them is this: You can’t do anything at all in ancient philosophy unless you know a bit of Greek and Latin, and you can’t do anything worthwhile in ancient philosophy unless you are a semi-decent classical scholar. But classical scholarship is a dying art: there aren’t as many scholars as there used to be, and their grasp of the ancient languages and the ancient world weakens and trembles. What’s more, fewer and fewer of them care to take up the philosophy of Greece and Rome.

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This state of affairs is exacerbated by a device known as the TLG. Load it into your laptop, and you have instant access to virtually the whole of Greek literature. You cut and paste snippets from authors whose very names mean nothing to you. You affirm—and you're right—that a particular word used here by Plato occurs 43 times elsewhere in Greek literature. And you can write an article—or a book—stuffed with prodigious learning. (There are similar things available for Latin.)

The TLG is a lovely little resource (I think that's the word), and I use her all the time. But she's strumpet-tongued: she flatters and she deceives. "What an enormous knowledge you have, my young cock—why not let me make a real scholar of you?" And the young cock crows on his dung-hill: he can cite anything and construe nothing.

"Come, Terence, this is sorry guff ... Exactly a century ago Ingram Bywater wrote this: 'I see the handwriting on the wall everywhere—even in Germany, and am not hopeful as to the future of the old humanities.' How wrong he was. And as for today, see what the editors say in the latest fascicule of the *Classical Review*: 'for the first time since 2000, the number of items in an issue has topped 200; as usual, the multitude and range testify to the vitality of the discipline.' You see mildew and aphids everywhere; and all the while the roses are blooming in the rose-garden."

Bywater was indeed wrong. (What convinced him that the end was nigh was the fact that the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge no longer required students of physics and chemistry to have a firm grounding in Greek.) But today—today things are different. The editors of the *Review* are whistling in the dark. True, unnumbered slabs of matter are unloaded at the bookshop doors; true, the slabs come in an unprecedentedly broad range of colours. But numbers are no proof of vitality; and the new colours are those of narratology, and metatextuality, and gender studies, and God knows what else.

"Come come, Terence, you're over-egging it. I'll allow that 90% of the books and articles published in ancient philosophy are worthless. But wasn't it always so? I'll allow that there is little which is epoch-making or path-breaking. But epochs aren't made every year nor paths broken once a month. Regard things with a judicious eye: doesn't every year see one or even two thoroughly decent new books, and two or even four thoroughly decent new articles? And were things ever really much better than that?"

Yes, they were. As far as philologically informed work on ancient philosophy is concerned, things were better fifty years ago.

Now for the second of the three reasons. Ancient philosophy is part of the history of philosophy; and although the history of philosophy—despite what many historians like to say—is no more a part of philosophy than the history of mathematics is a part of mathematics, nonetheless you can't do anything much in the history of a subject without having some sort of acquaintance with the subject itself. So if an ancient philosopher does not thereby philosophize, he must at least know his way about in philosophy—he must, so to speak, be a philosopher without doing philosophy. That being so, the general state of philosophy will influence the state of ancient philosophy. And the general state of philosophy is at present pretty dire.

Publishers' catalogues tell a story of decline. It's true, of course, that philosophy listings get more numerous every year. But there are among them fewer new contributions to philosophy. First, a great deal of what fills the catalogues consists of handbooks and course-books and companions and the like. They are wholly admirable items, but they are not philosophy. Secondly, there is the line of volumes—what, will it stretch on to the crack of doom?—on business ethics and medical ethics and legal ethics ...; in other words, on subjects which (as A. C. Lloyd liked to put it) are matters not for philosophers but for priests and commissars. Finally, there are the cuckoos in the nest; for all the catalogues, even from the most reputable publishing houses, have large and thrusting sections with curious labels like "Feminist thought" and "Continental philosophy." Any rude shepherd will put you right on the names of such things—and they don't include the word "philosophy." ("Really, that's going too far—after all, have you ever read a word of **** or of ****?"—"Why certainly not: it would only prejudice my mind against them.")

All this rubs off on the history of philosophy. When serious philosophers take Heidegger seriously, then historians of philosophy will. And so we are served up with things which make a rational man's each several hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful thingummyjig. Not that that's the worst of it. After all, a book which advertises itself as being about Lyotard and Lucretius, or Democritus and Derridadaism, or feminism and Favorinus, is honest and open and easily avoided. What's insidious is the seepage. Once upon a time I myself made a reference to Kierkegaard—a plagiarized reference, to be sure; but at the time it seemed rather chic. Fortunately, I saw the suppurations in time and took the antidote. Others don't. Slowly the poison the whole blood-stream fills.

Spare a glance for *la belle France*. Philosophy here is a wonderful thing. On the one hand, more of it is written,

bought, and read in France than in any other country in the world. Tell a pretty girl conducting an SNCF *sondage* that your profession is *philosophe* and—unlike her English counterpart—she'll look neither shocked nor embarrassed nor puzzled: philosophers are a normal part of life and a part of normal life. On the other hand, the first French philosopher, the unfeminist Favorinus of Arles, was a eunuch and a rhetorician; and philosophy in France has apparently taken its cue from Favorinus. The philosophical sky is covered with thick and woolly clouds, its monotonous greyness pierced here and there by flashes of brilliant sun-light. So in ancient philosophy: there are flashes, sharp and bright; but they flash through a caliginous gloom.

Most of the things published by my *chers collègues* are bad for my blood-pressure. Brought up from the *lycée* to think that hot air is the very substance of philosophy, they can scarcely fail to suppose that Plato and Company took the philosophical flights each in his own *montgolfière*.

And the third reason? Decades ago, when I was a stripling, the phrase “Publish or perish” drifted eastward across the Atlantic. How we smirked: only in America would anyone judge a philosopher a failure if he hadn't written two books by the age of forty, or measure academical excellence by counting words and pages. We smirk no more. We are sized up by the rule of bibliometry. We are assessed and evaluated, weighed up and counted out. It is, of course, for our own good, for the good of the universities, for the good of the profession and of the subject.

The ideology which underlies all this activity would be seen through by a child of five, and the techniques which govern it would be ridiculed by an intelligent child of six. Sheep-like, we bleat along with it.

There is in France an organization called the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique which dispenses unimaginably large sums of public money and is dedicated to the task of stifling research in the arts and sciences. It stifles with paper, and it stifles with electronic messages. It communicates in jargon and in acronyms. It does not use one sentence where two pages will suffice. It is peremptory in its commands. It is as pervasive as a London smog and as solid as blancmange. It is, as the bard put it, a whoreson zed, an unnecessary French letter.

Everywhere has its CNRS—under different names but smelling as rank. They waste time and energy—and oodles of cash. What is worse, far worse, they destroy professional standards and professional judgements.

For example, your CNRS affects new appointments. It evaluates a philosopher by counting the pages. We become accustomed to such evaluative technologies.

We come to find them normal. We come to use them ourselves. There are a couple of candidates for a job. One has written 32 articles and 4 books. The other has just published his doctoral thesis, 5 years after being doctored. Who gets the job? No prize for the first correct answer written on a postcard please. Of course, that's a caricature, a half-truth. But half a truth is better than no truth; and which of us has not heard a colleague say: “He's not published very much,” as though that were a reason to keep him off the short-list?

Or again, young scholars want jobs. They know that their publications will be counted, not read. They have every incentive to go for quantity and none to go for quality. So they take their All-Bran and void themselves with healthy regularity. To be sure, it doesn't matter if the third-rate publish third-rate papers. It doesn't much matter if the first-rate publish third-rate papers. But it does matter that the first-rate don't publish first-rate papers. I could name names. So could you.

Or again, young scholars apply for money—for a scholarship or for a research grant. They apply to their local CNRS. They receive a form—a many-paged form which must be completed in quadruplicate and certain parts of which can only be completed with the aid of a sophisticated piece of software. The young scholars pore over the forms. The questions which they find they are asked indicate the values of the CNRS which asks them. Those values determine the distribution of the dosh. Young scholars soon learn the right answers.

Naturally, it is of the first importance to establish a network. (Here we call it a *réseau*.) The network must have an infrastructure. It must be international and multidisciplinary and *plurifacultaire*. It must be formally ratified and stamped and sealing-waxed by important functionaries in important offices. As for the research project itself (for you must have a project: you can't just say say you'd rather like to do something on Ammonius or Archimedes)—as for the project, it must have a European dimension (if your CNRS is European—elsewhere, I suppose, the *mutanda* are mutated). It must follow the very model of a modern methodology—and it must establish a website (under the control of what we froggies call *un ouaibmaster*). The project must have a programme: what will you establish in the first 3 months? the first 6 months? and so on. And *last but not least* (to use the final gallicism of these pages), you will be asked to draw up a *status quaestionis* and to append a bibliography rather longer than your arm—not, of course, that you will be expected to have read any of the items on it.

All these demands are, I suppose, a ghastly parody of the sort of thing which physicists and chemists have

to produce when they ask for their nuclear reactors and their bunsen burners. (A young colleague of mine who presented a project on the Armenian translations of Greek philosophical texts had to estimate how much electricity the project would require.) It has little or nothing to do with research—or at least, with research in the history of philosophy. It's a joke. But it's a joke too black for laughter. And I have talked to young scholars who don't realize—who can't believe—that it's all a comedy of the higher lunacy; and who actually persuade themselves that a network, with a set of formal agreements and a home in electronic space, is a *sine qua non* of successful research.

Apocalypse next year, and three horsemen: the White Knight of Unlearning, the Cream-faced Count Charlatan, and the Black Baron Bureaucracy.

The Count is perhaps the least menacing of the three. After all, philosophy is nothing if not a thing of fads and fashions. Fifty years ago the phrase “continental philosophy” meant nothing. And no doubt fifty years hence the continental drift will have stopped. Except in France.

The Knight is the most dangerous. There is no unhorsing him. He is there for keeps. Classics will continue to decline. In a few decades, the study of Greek will match the study of Coptic or of Akkadian. And there's nothing anyone can do about that. (But perhaps here will be something we can make of it. Akkadian—if not Coptic—seems to flourish.)

As for the Baron, we could unseat him. By “we” I mean those of us whose careers are not still on the line, who have more memories than hopes—though perhaps a few hopes still. Passive resistance of various sorts is easy; for inaction is always easier than action. Passive resistance can be fun. But will we resist? Yes—when Hell freezes. That's why the Baron is the most infuriating of the horsemen—and he knows it.

The glass is falling hour by hour; the glass will fall for ever. And if you break the bloody glass, you won't hold up the weather.