

CLASSICS HAS LOST ITS WAY

The Observer devoted page 9 of its News to ‘a tragedy’: ‘one of Britain’s most respected classicists, Edith Hall’ left her research chair in protest at impending budget cuts. Hall said: ‘You cannot have a serious university without the study of the Greeks and Romans ... It is a tragedy because we were really building something here ... You can’t apply for research grants if you don’t know what level of staff you will have.’ Apart from quoting Edith Hall, *The Observer* gave voice to the university: ‘Difficulties in recruiting Classics students and a large financial shortfall at the department were cited as problems for the university, which faces the introduction of higher tuition fees.’ (Vanessa Thorp and Daniel Boffey, ‘Homer expert quits over Classics cutbacks’, *The Observer* 27.11.11)

The real tragedy is that the subject of Classics has lost its way. In its hayday, the teaching of Latin and Greek was focussed on ‘composition, which meant the translation of sophisticated literary English into Greek or Latin prose and of passages of English poetry into Greek and Latin verse’, as Kenneth Dover, the late President of Corpus Christi College at Oxford University and one of the greatest classicists of the second half of the twentieth century wrote in his autobiography (*Marginal Comment*, 1994, p. 37). Dover gives the reason: ‘I myself had always found that six hours or more spent on a composition (and I sometimes spent twelve) taught me more about language than the same amount of time on reading texts.’ (p. 67). What Dover means by ‘reading texts’ is translating Greek and Latin texts into English, for that is how the students’ minds were trained from a tender age at public schools. The task of translating Greek and Latin sentences, meant restructuring and ‘construing’ them so as to extract from them what they meant in English. At the most advanced stage one was reading the Latin and Greek texts in front of one’s eyes: in English. It involved a great effort, which lost all its meaning outside the school when good translations became available. Any culturally significant work had been translated not once, not twice, but many times.

When I decided to learn Latin and Greek in Czechoslovakia in the mid 1960s after obtaining my PhD in philosophy, I wanted to study Classics at Charles University. But when I looked at the curriculum, I realised that it was all wrong. I wanted to be able to read Greek so as to understand it in Greek, without translation, and learning Ancient Greek at the University would have conditioned my mind in such a way that I might never recover and never achieve my goal. I learnt Greek from English, German, and French textbooks. These languages threw their light on the Greek text, but once they illuminated it, the Greek began to shine with its own light.

After coming to Oxford, I attended two high-profile seminars, Professor Ackrill’s seminar at Brasenose College, which was attended by the best classical philosophers at Oxford University, and Professor Owen’s seminar on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics Z* in London, attended by some of the best classical philosophers from Oxford, Cambridge, and London Universities. Each meeting began by someone’s translating the text that was then discussed. I suggested that we should begin by reading the text aloud in Greek, but my suggestion fell on deaf ears. I did not give up. In 1981 the Oxford University hosted the Triennial Meeting of Greek and Roman Societies; at my request an ‘extra session’ was set up, at which passages

from Plato and Xenophon were to be read aloud in Greek, translated and discussed. The session was attended by two philosophers, Dr Wilkes and Myles Burnyeat, who let me read and translate the chosen texts, and then without a comment closed the session.

At the Triennial I was giving a paper on Aristophanes' *Clouds* – jointly with Dr Kathleen Wilkes. My views on the *Clouds* sharply differed from Dover's. In his view the Socrates in Aristophanes' comedy has very little, if anything, in common with the historical Socrates, apart from the name. In my view, Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates, staged when both Plato and Xenophon were little boys, becomes truly alive only if we read it against the background of Plato's and Xenophon's portrait of Socrates. Dr Wilkes sent our paper to Professor Dover, who opened his reply with the words: 'I am most grateful for the opportunity to read Dr Tomin's paper on the *Clouds*. It was a great pity that the organisers of the Triennial ensured my absence from the discussion by making me chair a different discussion at the same hour!' (The exclamation mark is Dover's.)

My views on Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds* go hand in hand with a considerably more far reaching difference between the views of Oxford Classical philosophers on Plato and my view of him. According to the ancient biographies of Plato, Plato's first dialogue was the *Phaedrus*, written when Socrates was still alive. This tradition has been rejected by modern Platonists. Only once, in 1982, was I allowed to present my views on the dating of the *Phaedrus* to Oxford students and academics. In my paper I refuted the modern 'proofs' for the late dating of the dialogue and offered strong arguments for its ancient dating. The event took place in the Lecture room at the Philosophy Centre; the room was packed, the event was chaired by Professor Ackrill. Dory Scaltsas argued that in the *Phaedrus* Plato presents the soul as divided into three parts – depicted as a team of two winged horses and a winged charioteer – and that the same tripartite division can be found in the *Timaeus*. We know that the *Timaeus* was a late dialogue, the *Phaedrus* therefore must be late as well. I replied that the doctrine of the soul in these two dialogues is fundamentally different: in the *Phaedrus* all three parts of the soul are immortal, uncreated, exist from eternity, whereas in the *Timaeus* the soul has been created, and its two lower parts are mortal. Professor Ackrill then asked, whether my view of Plato differs in any significant way from Shorey's unitary view of Plato, implying that if it were so, there was no need to worry, for Shorey's view was long surpassed by developmental theories of Plato's thought. I replied that there was indeed one fundamental thought which I shared with Shorey: Plato's theory of Forms, which comes prominently to the fore in the *Phaedrus*, underlies all his dialogues. But I do not accept Shorey's unitary theory, for Plato's theory of the soul profoundly changed as he progressed in life. In the *Phaedrus* all human souls saw the Forms prior to their fall and their first incarnation, whereas in the *Republic* and in the *Timaeus* only very few men and women can ever see the Forms. The Lecture room was electrified, nobody wanted to leave, yet at that point Professor Ackrill closed the discussion.

Since then, over the last twenty nine years, I have made considerable progress in interpreting Plato's dialogues on the basis of the ancient dating of Plato's *Phaedrus*, as can be seen in *The Lost Plato* on my website www.juliustomin.org, but all my attempts to obtain a permission to present the results of my investigation to Oxford students and academics have been rejected.

From time to time I therefore protest in front of Balliol College (I came to Oxford in 1980 at the invitation of the Master of Balliol), standing there with a small poster that says ‘A Philosopher from Prague appeals to Oxford Philosophers: LET US DISCUSS PLATO’. My latest protest took place on November 18. *Cherwell News*, the student online journal, ended the report on my protest by quoting an anonymous ‘source at the Faculty of Philosophy’: It’s not that Oxford academics aren’t willing to listen to Dr Tomin – it’s that they’ve heard it already.’

I might ask the anonymous source at the Faculty of Philosophy when he or she ‘has already heard’ what I want to say on Plato? How many of those who attended my talk on Plato at the Sub Faculty of Philosophy (as it was then) in 1982 still teach philosophy or classics at Oxford University? Can the younger members truthfully claim ‘I’ve heard it already’? And what about students, can they say ‘I’ve heard it already’? But more importantly, the claim of the source ‘that they’ve heard it already’ is fundamentally misleading and wrong. All major works on Plato of the past 172 years – ever since K. F. Hermann in 1839 published his *Geschichte und System der Platonischen Philosophie* – view the *Phaedrus* as a dialogue written after Socrates’ death: in Plato’s middle period, that is prior to the *Republic*, by scholars in the 19th century, in his late period, that is after the *Republic*, throughout the 20th century until the present day. Simply by virtue of my viewing the *Phaedrus* as Plato’s first dialogue, my interpretation of every dialogue of his on which I have focused my attention brings new results, shows each dialogue in a new light, as can be seen in the *The Lost Plato* on my website. Furthermore, each dialogue thus interpreted provides another strong argument in favour of the dating of the *Phaedrus* that I have proposed.

If the situation in Classics is to improve, then the approach to the study of Greek and Latin must undergo a profound revolution. To begin with, prospective students must learn that it is possible to understand Latin and Greek texts directly, without translating them in one’s mind into English, and they must be allowed to see what advantage such direct understanding of the texts entails. Secondly, they must learn that the direct understanding of the texts can be achieved only by radically transcending the tendency towards ever narrower specializations that bedevils the subject at present. You cannot learn Greek so as to understand it directly by becoming an expert on Homer, on Aeschylus, or on Plato. You can learn it only by reading and re-reading all the great treasures of Ancient Greek literature, poetry, history, and philosophy, thus making them part of one’s intellectual life in the process. With this aim in mind, I have recorded my reading aloud of a number of Plato’s dialogues in the original, and put the recordings on my website. More texts are recorded just on my computer, for I do the recordings primarily for my own benefit, for only in this way I enjoy to the full Plato, Aristotle, and the other authors I record. I have stopped putting any more recordings online, for I have reached the point when I must ask: should not this work be properly funded?