

COMMENTARY

Return of the Translator

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'The Death of the Author' is one of the great catchphrases of recent philosophy. It started as the title of an essay by Roland Barthes in 1968, and cleverly captures the idea that the act of reading ought to attend to textual structures rather than authorial personalities – that there are higher forms of criticism than literary biography. This anti-authorial line was not particularly new, of course, but it linked Barthes with several other big publishing events of the sixties: Althusser's *Reading Capital* (1965), Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967) and, shortly afterwards, an influential lecture by Foucault on the 'author-function'. *Death of the author* became a by-line for Parisian Theory, 1968.

It was mainly in England that the phrase caught on, or rather in English-language regions of the world. It was part of the flurry of intellectual importation which, like it or not, has been the most eye-catching phenomenon of philosophy in English over the last twenty or thirty years. And it really is a clever phrase. First it sums up a complicated argument, and then it packages it as if it were an established truth, to be questioned only by people who are seriously ill-informed. Those in the know will also realise that it alludes to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, the bullying bore who denounced old values not because they were valueless, but simply because they were old. It's not that the authority of God or the author is an incoherent construction, but simply that people do not take it seriously any more. 'Could it be possible?' says Zarathustra, recoiling in amazement: 'This old saint in the forest has not yet heard anything of this, that *God is dead*'?

For twenty-five years, then, importers of French philosophy have been scoffing at the old saints of bosky England. 'Could it be possible? These old fools have not yet heard anything of this, that *the author is dead*!' The fogeys retaliated with virulent sarcasm. The death-of-the-author theorists were charlatans, they said: emperors with no clothes. Just listen to how they write! Take any page at random, and see what you get: *text, discourse, interrogation, problematic, privileging, interpellation, alterity*: it's hardly even English! Reports of the death of the author may be exaggerated; but clear and responsible thinking – civil, unshowy and discussable – certainly seems to have been buried alive under this rubble of broken Franglais.

Patriots raising the alarm about fraudulence and tainted prose are never far away when foreign philosophy is introduced into the English-speaking world. They mocked the English Nietzscheans, Bergsonians, and Hegelians; they ostracised generations of English Marxists; they sniffed at Mill for his indulgence towards 'Germans'; they growled at Coleridge's attempts to show that

Kant was more than a passing fad, and at Hume for admiring that 'mountebank' Rousseau.

Biographers' Revenge

Authors imported under the death-of-the-author label have offered a very large target to their opponents. The ironies have been all too obvious, with publishers and academics falling over themselves to present their wares in terms of the 'approaches' which can be tagged with the names of different authors. Althusser, Foucault, Derrida; Irigaray, Cixous, Kristeva: these are the sorts of terms that structured the new syllabuses, research projects, and publishers' lists. Summarise a Theorist was almost the only game in town. Trade publishing catered to the same author-fetish by means of literary biographies. No-one behaved as if they thought the author really was dead.

Biographical nemesis is now starting to engulf the death-of-the-author authors. There is Derrida's 'Circumfession' – a set of autobiographical jottings which Derrida has appended, at the foot of each page, to a painstaking summary of his life's work written by Geoffrey Bennington in a high-altitude mid-channel style. (Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington, University of Chicago Press, 1993). As the title suggests, Derrida's memoir ranges over his penis and other more personal matters: it has given joy to all who bear a grudge against great thinkers.

Foucault and Althusser have been even more gratifying. For one thing, both of them are dead in reality, not just in Theory, which may give all of us a certain feeling of superiority. There is also the exciting thought that they were death-dealers: Althusser's pitiful murder of his wife, recounted in the extraordinary opening pages of his book; and the exciting, though false, allegation that Foucault deliberately infected people with AIDS when he knew he was dying. (James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, and David Macey, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, all reviewed by Kate Soper in *Radical Philosophy* 66; and Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*, reviewed by David Macey in this issue.)

Reviewers have commented with gaiety on the paradox of biographising authors who supposedly proclaimed the death of the author, and the old routines about emperors and foul prose have duly been revived. Now that the fling with French Theory is over, it is asked, may we be allowed to become our moderate empirical selves again? The greying theorists have done their weary duty too: denouncing those guardians of tradition for still

being so *complacent*, so *anti-theoretical*, so *empiricist*. In short: *so bloody English!*

Alas, poor English. Some commentators praise us for our doughty Ambridge empiricism and our refusal to take foreigners seriously. Others insult us (and, if they are consistent, themselves) for the same thing. But how can any of them be so sure of their stereotype of the national philosophical character? And anyway, what is *English* supposed to mean? Not only the people of England, it turns out: inhabitants of Wales, Scotland, and probably Ireland, and perhaps even the relics of empire in Australia, Canada, Africa, Asia and the United States are all reckoned to be patriots of the empiricist nation: all those bits of Western Civ, in short, which are supposed to lie outside the cultural ambit of France and Germany.

Philosophical Nations

The idea of France, Germany and England as the three philosophical nations of the modern world goes back to the eighteenth century, and the first systematic histories of western philosophy. Coleridge, who was the first to present such a history in English (a course of lectures given in 1818–19), postulated a providential international division of labour between England, France and Germany. ‘One country,’ he says, ‘was to employ its brains, another its hands, another its senses.’ Senses belonged to the French; brains to the metaphysical Germans; and hands were left to the English. Coleridge’s sentiment was endorsed by Mill, perhaps the first to use the fateful term ‘Continental philosophers’ to describe thinkers whose ‘lofty aspirations’ were bound to overshadow the ‘sober good sense, free from extravagance’, of ‘the English mind’.

It may seem an excessively English thing to say, but the theory of national philosophical types does not really have much empirical support. Intellectuals in France and Germany have not always found their compatriots lofty and adventurous, and it would not be hard to see a strong line of speculative idealism running through such subjects of the English crown as Herbert of Cheshire, Thomas More, Henry More, Cudworth, Norris, Trotter, Berkeley, Shaftesbury, Reid, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Martineau, Hamilton, Green, Simcox, Bradley; or – if one cared to cast the net a little wider – Milton, Blake, Carlyle, Eliot, Ruskin and Arnold. It is as if there were an international conspiracy to exclude any writer from the canon of English philosophy who fails to conform to the a priori truth that English thinkers are insular, theory-shy empiricists. As W. R. Sorley pointed out in his *History of British Philosophy* (1920), the view could only be sustained by ‘historians on the look-out for system rather than for thought’. The stereotype was so comprehensively inaccurate, he said, that it ‘does not admit of defence and hardly of excuse’.

One might go further than Sorley: if modern English philosophy has one obsession, it is translation and commentary on French and German philosophy. When philosophy was established as an academic discipline in England in the nineteenth century, it was enthused first by Kant and then by Hegel. And English analytic philosophy, originating in Russell and Moore’s revolt against idealism, was also strongly marked by foreign origins, both French and German. (And Italian too, which makes a welcome change from the great-power chauvinism of the three philosophical nations.) Phenomenology was also getting established, with

Husserl’s lectures in London in 1922 and Boyce Gibson’s translation of *Ideas* in 1931. It was not till the fifties that the internationalism of English academic philosophy faltered, with Oxfordian analysis priding itself on being an inheritor of ‘our empiricism’ and dismissing everything else as ‘Continental Philosophy’ – glamorous perhaps, but fraudulent, ill-written, and scandalously unclear.

In the United States, with its refugees from Nazism, the identification of analytic philosophy with Englishness was never plausible. And in Oxford itself, one young student was already rebelling against the ‘insularity’ of Oxford. He was Michael Dummett, who later became Professor of Logic at the University, and gave analytic philosophy a new lease of life there. In an interview in his *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (London, Duckworth, 1993), he describes how he took a course on epistemology in about 1949, where one of the set texts was Frege’s *Foundations of Mathematics*, just translated by J. L. Austin. ‘I was absolutely bowled over by it; I had never read anything of that quality in my entire life. I therefore decided that I had to read everything that this man had written.’ Like countless English thinkers before and since, Dummett hearkened to a philosophical call from across the Channel. He got a German dictionary and started toiling through Frege – a commitment which matured into his celebrated opinion that the only proper object of philosophical study is ‘meaning’ or ‘thought’, and that the only viable path to it lies through the analysis of language.

Foreign Origins

Origins of Analytical Philosophy picks up threads from Dummett’s earlier books, weaving them into an explanation of how, between 1884 and 1906, Frege opened the path that led to authentic linguistic philosophy. Frege’s breakthrough, on this reading, was his rejection of psychologism, or the idea that thought can be analysed in terms of subjective mental processes. Dummett calls this result ‘the extrusion of thoughts from the mind’ (though ‘death of the author’ might have commended itself too), and he holds that it was not due to Frege on his own, but to Husserl as well, and that both of them were standing on the shoulders of Brentano. The theoretical rewards of treating Husserl and Frege as close intellectual collaborators are demonstrated in Dummett’s discussion of colour and language, whose interest adds weight to his conclusion that ‘the roots of analytical philosophy ... are the same roots as those of the phenomenological school’, and that the idea of a gulf between English and Continental philosophy is ‘absurd’. The problem of the identity of English philosophy also comes up in John Skorupski’s *English-Language Philosophy 1750–1945* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993). The story Skorupski tells comes in two phases. Up to the end of the nineteenth century, he says, English philosophy was essentially a debate between naturalism, which saw human beings as part of nature, and idealism, which tried to place them outside it. In the twentieth century, however, both naturalism and idealism were replaced by ‘modernism’ which, according to Skorupski, was riven by a new polarity of reason and feeling, the former represented by analytical philosophy, the latter by phenomenology. Philosophical modernism is now played out, he argues, in both analytical and phenomenological forms, and the future lies in an

eventual unification between 'analytical modernism' and 'naturalism'.

Skorupski accepts Dummett's account of analytic philosophy, and so, despite having defined his subject as 'English-language philosophy', he devotes more pages to Frege than to anyone else except Mill; and he offers almost as much on Wittgenstein, together with expositions of Carnap, Schlick and Neurath. The sources of analytic philosophy, after all, are 'at least as much Continental (specifically Austrian and German) as they are Anglo-American'.

Skorupski's enlightened internationalism is, I suppose, no less than one should expect from a would-be 'analytical naturalist'. Curiously, though, his tale is still haunted by the ghosts of philosophical national characters, conceived in unashamedly organicist terms. One of his main explanatory principles is 'the British naturalistic temper', and he finds something monstrous in Coleridge's attempt, as he puts it, 'to graft German idealism onto that tree of English tradition'. He considers Green's attempt to 'plant absolute idealism in British soil' to have been 'quixotic', even if the outcome was a 'successful transplantation'. ('This brief and gorgeous flowering of absolute idealism in a distant and hostile climate was certainly a curious thing. The roots and original stock were undoubtedly German, yet the resulting plant was profoundly and paradoxically British.') Fortunately for us all, Green was of 'solid Puritan and Evangelical Midland stock', so that, despite a 'fatal inheritance' from Hegel, he always belonged – as did Coleridge – to a 'recognisably British mode of philosophising'. (Bradley, on the other hand, was not 'a man of roots'.) When at last Russell put an end to the idealist invasion he was simply reasserting 'the collective *geist* (sic) of English-language philosophy'.

The what? The *Geist* of English philosophy? Does a German idealist word like *Geist* really belong in the word-store of a British analytical naturalist? Or is Skorupski himself, perhaps, no 'man of roots'?

Native Witcraft

The phenomenon is not really surprising, of course: no one would get far with philosophy in English who avoided words borrowed from other languages. A history of British philosophy could describe ten centuries of discussion in Latin (Alcuin to Berkeley), to which less than four centuries in English might be seen as a brief autumnal epilogue, spoken in a second language. A different book with 'English language philosophy' as its theme might describe the halting attempts of English authors to get their language to speak philosophy – sometimes by transliterating Latin words (such as *quaestio* or *principium*), and occasionally, more imaginatively, by forcing English words to serve the turn (as, in part, 'begging the question' does for *petitio principii*). One of the great might-have-beens in the history of the language is the effort of one Ralph Lever, in the sixteenth century, to devise a philosophical vocabulary rooted in English, so that 'Logica' would become "Witcraft" for instance; and instead of such Latinisms as 'every proposition is an affirmation or a negation', we could come out with the Bullish fact that 'every shewsay is a yeasay or a naysay'.

Lever failed. As a result, philosophy in English has always been composed in sentences which many native-speakers

experience as alien or exotic. It is sometimes hard to tell the difference between people engaged in arduous thinking, and those who are hoping to sound impressive, at least to themselves, by juggling recklessly with macaronic wonder-words. Even Coleridge lost his poetry when he started to philosophise, and was satisfied to say that 'intelligence and being are reciprocally each other's substrate' or that Fichte's 'theory degenerated into a crude egoismus, a boastful and hyperstoic hostility to Nature ... while his religion consisted in the assumption of a mere *ordo ordinans*, which we were permitted *exoterice* to call God'. Dr Johnson must have groaned in his gavel. You do not have to share his metaphysics of pure English to think that such sentences are short of the conversability, colour and rhythm of everyday working prose, or to think he may have had a point when he blamed 'the licence of translators, whose idleness and ignorance, if it be suffered to proceed, will reduce us to babble a dialect of France', except that in Coleridge's case it was German, Greek and Latin as well.

Philosophical English has been fashioned by the translators, mostly anonymous, as much as by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume – who anyway were translators themselves, in that they thought in Latin or French as well as writing in English. And the tendency to prefer transliterating Latin or Greek–Latin philosophical terms by the job lot, rather than translating them one by one, means that philosophy occupies a part of the English lexicon which is poshly distinguished by its undigested latinity – a problem which is far less severe in French, where latinisms are not exotic, or in German, where (because of a process of translation that goes back to the tenth century) it is possible to speak philosophy with hardly any latinisms at all. Thanks to the translators, philosophy suffers a far greater democratic deficit in English than in French or German.

Philosophy in English lives amongst anxieties of translation. This applies to Bacon and Locke, as well as to Bradley and Green; and it applies to the death-of-the-author phenomenon too. Like its predecessors, it has been evaluated as much in terms of its language (delicious or unpalatable according to taste) as of what it tries to say. Some of the linguistic acquisitions it has brought with it, such as *deconstruction*, or the refurbishment of *desire* and *discourse*, may be gains. Some, however, are more embarrassing – such as the attempt to incorporate the term *différance* into English as an unmodified French word. Derrida devised the term in the hope of thematising difference in a different way. To highlight the difficulty of the attempt, he wrote it with an 'a', so that the difference between difference and differance could be seen but not heard. But everything that may be gained by this device is destroyed in English if the word is left in French, since the difference between difference and *différance* is all too painfully audible. Translationism here has become a boomeranging status symbol rather than an enlargement of anyone's thought and language.

There is nothing more English than 'Continental philosophy'. Philosophy in English (as in every other language, no doubt) is a creature of translations. Its translators are its poets, the unacknowledged legislators of the English philosophical world. And so English philosophy remains haunted by a repressed knowledge of its alien origins: after the death of the author, perhaps the return of the translator?