

ANOTHER PROTEST AT BALLIOL?

PRE-PROTEST EMAILS TO BALLIOL ACADEMICS

I.

Dear All,

Allow me to inform you that on November 18 I am contemplating another protest at Balliol. Why November 18? On that day, twenty two years ago, Nick Cohen wrote in *The Independent Magazine*:

'The judgments passed by Oxford dons on Julius Tomin seem outrageously brutal ... Jonathan Barnes, Professor of Ancient Philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, impatiently brushed aside the suggestions that the Conservatives' reduction in funding for British philosophy since 1980 might explain why there was never an academic post for Tomin at Oxford. "That's not the point at all," he said. "He would not be accepted as a graduate here, let alone be given a teaching job. He's like a recalcitrant student who can't admit he's wrong."

The scholarly points in question were two:

'His [i.e. Tomin's] most serious accusation is that British classical philosophers cannot understand Ancient Greek ... without having to translate it ... As philosophers at Oxford are among the few left in the English speaking world who still insist that students must study Greek philosophy in the original, Tomin's criticism has not been well received. "It's crap," said Jonathan Barnes. "I have absolutely no idea how he can say it. One of the relatively decent features of this university is that people have to read the original texts, not the translations ... Tomin's work has raised a second controversy. He has revived an ancient tradition that *The Phaedrus* was Plato's first dialogue ... Barnes thinks that even if Tomin's views were not "baloney", there are no interesting consequences.'

The same two points are as pressing now as twenty two years ago. Concerning the first point see my 'Reflections on a recent conference of classical philosophers' (online at www.juliustomin.org), in which I discuss the SAAP 2011 conference, held at the Philosophy Centre at Oxford University in mid September. To be more precise, in the given text I reflect on my having been excluded from the discussion on Jessica Moss' paper on 'Hedonism and the Divided Soul in Plato's *Protagoras*'.

Concerning the second point, let me quote *The Daily Telegraph* of August 25, 1988:

"He [i.e. Tomin] holds that the *Phaedrus* is Plato's first dialogue, which is contrary to the beliefs of pretty well all scholars in the field in this century," said Dr Sedley, editor of *Classical Quarterly*, and director of studies at Christ's

College, Cambridge ... If Dr Tomin were right it would affect a great deal of Platonic scholarship. "I think people just have a great difficulty seeing how it can be right," he [i.e. Dr Sedley] said. "It means he is asking people to give up nearly everything else they believe about Plato's development."

In the essay 'Plato's *Phaedrus* in Prague and in Oxford' I have summarized the most important reasons for my conviction that the *Phaedrus* was Plato's first dialogue (online at www.juliustomin.org). I hope you will agree with me that I should be given an opportunity to present this essay at Balliol College. If Oxford classical philosophers still insist that I am wrong on this point, let them prove so in an open discussion. If I prove to be right, it will be Oxford University in the first place that will benefit from fundamental reorientation of Platonic studies, which it will involve.

I have bought my train tickets for a journey to Oxford and back for November 18. Nothing would please me more than if I learnt that my appeal to you has had a positive effect, and if I thus could spend all my time at Oxford in the Bodleian Library.

With best wishes,

Julius Tomin

II.

LET US DISCUSS IN THE MEANTIME
THE FUTURE OF CLASSICS AND CLASSICAL PHILOSOPHY

Dear All,

I have informed you about 'Another Protest At Balliol' contemplated for November 18. In the meantime, let me discuss the future of classics and classical philosophy against the background of 'Cash value placed on degrees "threatens arts and humanities"' (*The Guardian* October 20, 2011):

'The increasing emphasis being placed on the financial value of a degree threatens the future of arts and humanities research, according to the vice-chancellor of Cambridge University ... The arts and humanities **enriched** people's lives, he said, "Medical science can make us live to 90. If you haven't got the arts and humanities what's the point of living until 90?"

In a month I shall be 73; my daily travels into the realm of the Ancient Greeks are as important for my intellectual well-being as my morning physical exercises and daily long walks with my dog are for my bodily well-being.

After I wrote to you about my contemplated protest at Balliol I had to do some 'enriching' before turning to the present topic. I read some Pindar (the 3rd strophe, antistrophe, and epode of the 5th Pythian Ode) and then I recorded my reading of Plato's *Republic* Book VI, lines 489c8-491d9. Listening to my recording, I noted that I misread the line 491a4; Socrates tells Adeimantos *doxan hoian legeis* which means 'opinion that you express', but I read *doxan hoian echeis*, which means 'opinion which you have'. I erased the recording, and did it anew. This time I was happy with it and could begin to write this email.

I had passed too quickly over my reading of Pindar. The 3rd strophe begins 'He also bestows ...' To get the context right I had to reread the 2nd epode, which speaks of Apollon as the founder of the Greek colony in Kyrene in Lybia. In the 3rd strophe Apollon figures as the god who 'bestows remedies for grievous illnesses upon men and women ...'

I could not enjoy Pindar as I do now without the help of the annotated English translation (by W. H. Race in the Loeb Classical Library edition of Pindar), for "Pindar's dialect is a highly artificial idiom which contains a complex mixture of epic, Doric, and Aeolic forms" (Race's 'Introduction' to the 1st volume of Pindar, p. 24). I read the Greek text first. Sometimes I get the general meaning vaguely right, sometimes I am completely at a loss. Then I read the English translation and then I return to the Greek text. At this point I mostly get the meaning of the Greek; if not,

I repeat the action, reread the English translation, then the Greek, until I am fully satisfied that I have got the meaning right in Greek.

Then I go to Liddell & Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* in order to fully appreciate Pindar's Greek. There are expressions which can be found in the given meaning only in Pindar, all well recorded in the *Lexicon*, at least as far as I can tell on the basis of what I read so far. I encountered no such expression in the gamma stanzas, nevertheless, I found the deeper exploration of the Greek terms against the background of the English terms used in Race's translation very rewarding.

Race's 'grievous illnesses' renders Pindar's *bareian nosôn*; 'grievous' is primarily associated with 'harmful', *barys* is primarily associated with 'heavy in weight'; 'bestows upon' renders Pindar's *nemei* means 'deal out, dispose, distribute', often used as such in Homer for distributing meat and drink by men, and in reference to gods distributing their gifts, e.g. Zeus distributing wealth and happiness (*olbon*). But the word has many meanings which are very far removed from its original meaning, notably in Pindar, such as 'inhabit', 'hold', 'possess'. When I looked up 'bestow' in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* I was bewildered by the plethora of different meanings: '1. To place, locate; to dispose of (in some place) (arch.). 2. To stow away (arch.) 3. To lodge, put up (arch.)' Only the last meaning applies: '6. To confer as a gift.'

Most importantly, in the course of all this work I became acutely aware that Pindar's genitive construction *bareian nosôn akesmata* loses its immediacy in the English prepositional rendering 'remedies for grievous illnesses' and the English prepositional construction 'bestows upon men and women' loses the immediacy of the dative construction *andressi kai gunaixi nemei*.

At the end of the 3rd strophe and the beginning of the 3rd antistrophe I read 'And mine it is to proclaim the delightful glory that comes to Sparta, whence men borne as Aigeidai, my forefathers, came to Thera'. Race's note enlightened me: 'The Theban Aigeidai assisted in the establishment of the Dorians in Amyclai. I take the sentence to refer to the poet's announcement of his personal connection with the Spartan Aigeidai ...'

At the end of the 3rd antistrophe I read: 'the nobly built city of Kyrene, which the sons of Antenor, Trojan foreigners delighting in bronze arms, still hold, for they came with Helen after they saw their homeland go up in smoke during the war.' I appreciated Race's note: 'The Trojan Antenoridai had settled the city before the colonization from Thera.' I would have welcomed a note on the surprising version of the story concerning Helen, which Pindar's text implies.

The English 'Trojan foreigners' stands for *xenoi Trôes*, the word 'foreigners' has nothing positive about it to my ear, in contrast to the Greek *xenos*, which means

primarily *'guest-friend'*, applied to persons and states bound by a treaty or tie of hospitality' (Liddell & Scott). The original Trojan settlers were 'warmly welcomed' (*endukeôs dekontai*; *endukeôs* means 'sedulously', 'kindly', involving the notion of perseverance and steadfastness, which its rendering by 'warmly' lacks; 'welcomed' suggests 'to a visitor or stranger that he is welcome', as if the Greeks were the original settlers welcoming the arriving Trojans; *dekontai* has no such connotations, thus *dechomai tina summachon* means 'accept or admit as an ally') by the Greek settlers coming from Thera, as we learn in the 3rd epode. In the Preface to Pythian 5 Race illuminates the given passage: 'The colonists from Thera still honour an earlier group of settlers, the sons of Antenor, who came from Troy after its destruction.'

When I then read the three stanzas in their totality after all this work, only then I fully enjoyed the Greek text. It was well worth it. Any good translation of any Greek master – such as Race's translation of Pindar or Jowett's translation of Plato – is the result of concentrated scholarly work of generations of scholars. Paradoxically, it is only in the resulting reading and understanding the given text in Greek, which in the final instance is free from any interference of the English or any other translation, as well as from any elucidating notes, that all that scholarly work is fully validated.

Classicists and classical philosophers carry a tremendous responsibility for the rapid decline in these two disciplines and for the resulting and concomitant lack of respect for arts and humanities. Throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries some of the best minds at universities in Britain, France, Germany, Austria, the USA (Race's edition of Pindar was published in LCL in 1997), and a number of other countries, devoted their lives to producing and elucidating the original texts of Ancient Greek writers, poets, historians, rhetoricians, and philosophers. They did this – at least the best of them did – with the desire to make these texts as accessible and as fully understandable and enjoyable as possible in the original, but the methods through which they achieved this goal were not suited for the enjoyment of those texts. Their knowledge of Greek, essential as it was for the accomplishment of their task, was acquired by years of drill in translating Greek into English (German, French ... Czech) and from English into Greek, and so they could never get rid of the habit of translating.

Proper enjoyment of these texts requires a completely different approach to language. It requires understanding Greek in Greek, without translating it in one's head. The inability to face up to the required change meant that all these riches became more and more neglected, victims of further and further 'specialization', and subjects of ever less and less authentically researched secondary literature. Instead of becoming the most valuable and inexhaustible resource of cultural riches, classics and classical philosophy thus became the most poignant examples of academic alienation.

This can be changed; Greek can be taught in such a way that the learner begins to understand Greek directly in Greek from the very first sentence he or she tackles in Greek – with the help of an illuminated and illuminating teacher. Instead of sweating with parsing and translating, learners can profit from their teacher's explaining to them the grammatical form of each word and elucidating its syntactic function within the given sentence, and thus conveying its meaning. This didactic function can be provided by teachers who themselves must translate the text in order to understand it. I am convinced that any teacher who would venture on this path would be the first to benefit by acquiring the ability to enjoy understanding Ancient Greek directly in Greek.

With best wishes,

Julius Tomin

III.

ON A LIGHTER NOTE

Dear All,

Allow me to send you my third pre-Protest at Balliol email, addressed primarily to Balliol academics:

Inspired by the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University – “If you haven’t got the arts and humanities what’s the point of living until 90?” – I wrote to you that my daily travels into the realm of the Ancient Greeks are important for my intellectual well-being in my seventies. Let me add that they are at least as important for my physical well-being: ‘The neural networks in the brain strengthen as a result of language learning.’ (Michael Gove in ‘Gove: teach languages from age five’, *The Guardian* 01. 10. 2011)

I wrote about my encounter with Pindar and about my recording of Plato’s *Republic*, but omitted to say that I have sandwiched between these two activities a lighter read, *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius with its exuberant delight in Greek myths. At places the *Argonautica* reads like a travelogue:

‘And just as the sun was setting they reached the tip of the Chersonesus. There a stiff south wind was blowing for them, as they raised their sails to the following wind and entered the choppy currents of Athamas’ daughter [Helle, i.e. Hellespont]. One open sea was left behind at dawn, while during the night they were traversing another sea inside the headlands of Rhoeteum, as they kept the land of Ida on their right. After leaving Dardania, they headed for Abydos, after which they passed Percote, the sandy shore of Abarnis, and holy Pityeia. And so during the night, as the ship proceeded by sail and oar, they traversed the length of Hellsport, turbulent with eddies.’ (Book 1, lines 925-935)

The *Argonautica* radiates with the joy of sailing, as does *Child of the Sea*, a book that my wife, Doina Cornell, has just published in the Kindle format on Amazon. Doina was 7 when she, her younger brother Ivan, her mother Gwenda, and father Jimmy began their seven-year voyage around the world on their sailing boat named Aventura. I particularly enjoy the Greek islands seen through her eyes as an 8 year old:

‘Our course was set for the harbour of Iraklion on the island of Crete. I really wanted to see Knossos, the ancient Cretan capital. I had read so many times the legend of Theseus, who entered the labyrinth and killed the Minotaur. Knossos was where the labyrinth was supposed to have been.

The ruins of Knossos were huge and stretched in all directions. There were rooms, corridors, narrow alleyways, halls and storerooms. Ivan and I crept along behind Mum and Dad, wondering if the Minotaur might spring out at any moment.

Dad made us pose next to some *pithoi*, massive terracotta pots that once stored grain, wine, or oil. All three of us could have fitted into any one of them with plenty of room to spare. "Come on, Doina," said Mum, "we've lots to see."

I'd spotted a little purple flower growing by the pot. I picked it and said, "Coming," but when I looked up, they had gone.

I ran in the direction I thought they must have taken, but I could not see them at all. The alleyways twisted and turned and I knew I was lost. My heart began to beat faster and my mouth was dry ... Soon I heard Mum calling. She ran to me. "Are you ok?" "I got lost!" I was almost breathless with excitement. "Really lost, in the real labyrinth."

Although the *Argonautica* is easier to read than Pindar, I follow the same procedure, begin by reading the Greek text, then Race's translation, look up all the unfamiliar terms in Liddell & Scott, and only then, on my second reading, I fully enjoy the Greek text. The unfamiliar terms are many, for Apollonius indulged in archaisms, overdoing it at places. Thus Hypsipyle 'spoke' – *iske* – to Jason. I have never come across *iske* meaning 'spoke'; in Homer it means 'make like', 'feign', 'think like'. Liddell & Scott says that this word means 'spoke' only in Alexandrian Poets, first by Apollonius in the given passage, 'through a misinterpretation of Homer'.

With each move from the Greek original to the English translation and back to the Greek text I am amazed how it works. In what form does the Greek and the English 'meet' in my sub-conscious? Michael Gove is undoubtedly right that such an activity strengthens the neural networks in the brain. But there must be more to it. Gilbert Ryle in his 'pioneering book' was wrong when he dismissed the notion of the soul as a category-mistake: 'I shall often speak of it, with deliberate abusiveness, as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine".' (*The Concept of Mind*, 1949, p. 17) The information about the world around us, as it terminates in the brain, is processed in time and formatted in space in a completely different shape and form from the world as we live *through* our sensory perception and in our thought. Therefore there must be something that receives the information as it is processed and stored in the brain and transforms it into the stream of perceptions and thoughts that form our living conscious experience. If for no other reason, this 'something' deserves the name of soul because of Plato:

Socrates: 'Think now. Is it more correct to say that the eyes are that *with* which we see, or that *through* which we see? Do we hear *with* the ears or *through* the ears?'

Theaetetus: 'Well, I should think, Socrates, that it is 'through which' we perceive in each case, rather than 'with which'.

Socrates: 'Yes, my boy. It would be a very strange thing, I must say, if there were a number of senses sitting inside us as if we were Wooden Horses, and there were not some single form, soul or whatever one ought to call it, to which all these converge – something *with* which, *through* the senses, as if they were instruments, we perceive all that is perceptible.' (*Theaetetus* 184c5-d5, tr. M. J. Levett)

Only when we critically reappraise the Platonic (Socratic) notion of the soul, only when we properly appraise the tremendous 'extent' and importance of our subconscious, we shall be able properly to acknowledge the importance of humanities for our well-being. Masaryk, philosopher and first president of Czechoslovakia, coined an adage 'As many languages you know as many times you are human'. In my experience, learning a foreign language, especially a language that opens the possibility of authentically enjoying great literature, such as that written in the Russian, the German and French languages (I do not speak of the English as a foreign language), greatly enhances and intensifies one's being.

The Greeks can give pleasure in translation, even in the re-telling of their stories, from the early childhood onwards. My son Dan is 9 years old. Next term he will learn about the Ancient Greeks at school. The other day he sat with me before bedtime and read to me from his *Greatest Greek Myths* produced as The Comic Strip. The major part he had already read on his own, beginning with the words 'People have always told stories. The Ancient Greeks told some of the best stories ever ...' He began with Helen of Troy and was in the midst of 'The Voyages of Odysseus' when his mother wanted to put him to bed. He insisted on finishing the book, and so he finished with the chapter on 'The Greeks and Romans and everyone else'. The last caption says 'After the Romans people kept on telling Greek myths', seconded by an elegant gentleman's figure: 'Including me, the Great Bard, Shakespeare.' Then Poseidon pops up from the sea, brandishing his trident: 'Our stories will never die.'

This gives me hope that my reading aloud and recording of the masterpieces of Greek philosophy and literature one day will be appreciated, and that the authentic enjoyment of their work will acquire its proper place in the lives of those who can go that far.

With best wishes,

Julius Tomin