

WHY?

On May 16 I planned to present a paper on 'Socrates and the Laws of Athens' at Charles University in Prague, but it appears that Charles University cannot pay for my expenses. Instead, I shall protest on that day at Balliol College. I shall protest against the financial situation in which the Czech Universities have been left after the Velvet Revolution, and I shall protest against the on-going degradation of Classics and Classical Philosophy at Oxford University.

For thirty one years I have tried in vain to reopen a discussion on Socrates and Plato with Oxford philosophers. I speak of reopening, for I discussed Plato and Socrates with Oxford philosophers in my seminar in Prague in 1979; in April 1980 my discussion on this theme with Dr Kenny, the Master of Balliol, was brutally interrupted by the Czech police. Why have all my attempts to reopen the discussion failed so far? A part of the answer is given by Dr David Sedley, a prominent Platonic scholar: 'Dr Tomin ... is asking people to give up nearly everything they believe about Plato's development.' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 25. 8. 1988). But there is an even more fundamental reason, which I have touched upon in 'The Right to Question' published in the *Oxford Magazine* No. 65, Hilary Term 1991: 'even the best British Platonic scholars habitually translate in order to understand. If that is so, their acquaintance with Plato's thought cannot but be limited; it cannot stand up to the light of an open discussion.'

I offered 'Socrates and the Laws of Athens' for presentation to the Master of Balliol several months ago, but I have received no reply. (You can find the text on my website www.juliustomin.org as the 2nd chapter of the 2nd volume of *The Lost Plato*.) Why is it important that I obtain a permission to present the paper at Oxford University? I hope it will rekindle interest in Socrates and Plato. They both come to the fore prominently in the *Apology* and the *Crito*, on which I focus my attention. Plato wrote these two dialogues with the widest possible readership in mind, yet they have tenaciously resisted any satisfactory explanation. In the *Apology* Socrates challenges the Athenian legal system at the cost of his life, in the *Crito*, less than a month later, he defends and obeys the laws at the cost of his life. I suggest a simple solution: Plato wrote the *Apology* during Socrates' imprisonment, expecting Socrates to be freed from prison by his friends and prepared to go into exile together with him, the *Crito* he wrote during his exile in Megara, where he went after the death of Socrates out of fear of prosecution. This solution is in tune with the ancient biographic tradition according to which Plato began to write his dialogues during Socrates' lifetime; why has it eluded Platonic scholars?

The ancient biographic tradition has been rejected by modern Platonic scholarship, and it became unthinkable to view the *Apology* as written during Socrates' imprisonment. It began in the 19th century under the influence of George Grote who

based his rejection on Plato's autobiographic remarks in the *Seventh Letter*. Plato writes in it about his desire to pursue a political career and Grote maintains that Plato began to write dialogues only after he had given up on politics and says that he did so under the impact of Socrates' death. On this basis Grote delineated the playing field for Platonic scholars as follows: 'An interval of fifty-one years separates the death of Socrates from that of Plato. Such an interval is more than sufficient for all the existing dialogues of Plato, without the necessity of going back to a more youthful period of his age.' But Plato's *Seventh Letter* tells a very different story: Plato gave up on Athenian politics only some twelve years after the death of Socrates.

Grote's misinterpretation of Plato's *Seventh Letter* cannot be a mistake, it must have been deliberate. Kenneth Dover, the late President of Corpus Christi and one of the greatest classicists of the second half of the twentieth century, can shed some light on it. In the introductory chapter to his autobiography he explains why he 'concealed the identities of living individuals': 'I have a certain revulsion against disclosure of anything said by well-known people, if they are still alive' (*Marginal Comment*, 1994, p. 4). Grote was not only one of the greatest nineteenth century Plato scholars, but a politician of note as well, and he was presumably thinking of the disastrous consequences if students wrote freely about their teachers, teachers about their fellow teachers, Members of Parliament about their fellow Members. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when Grote wrote his opus magnum, Plato was regarded as a model of education in public schools as well as universities. Whatever may have been the reasons for Grote's misinterpretation, the question from now on stands simply as follows: Is Platonic scholarship going to continue to acquiesce to being based on a blatant lie? This is a question which I should like to address to students and academics both at Charles University in Prague and at Oxford University. The occasion could bring into motion the process of rethinking Plato, which is long overdue, and it could mark the beginning of a new approach to Greek.

I speak about protests in plural, for I intend to make it an annual event. If in a year's time the Czech philosophers and classicists remain unable to pay for my expenses, I shall repeat my protest at Balliol on May 16, 2012. If the Czechs find the money, but Oxford University persists in its rejection of my offer, I shall change the date of my protest to November 18, 2011. Why November 18? On that day in 1989 'Jonathan Barnes, Professor of Ancient Philosophy at Balliol College, Oxford, impatiently brushed aside the suggestion 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.' (Quoted from 'The Pub Philosopher' by Nick Cohen, *The Independent Magazine*, 18 November 1989).

I have reasons to believe that the view expressed by Jonathan Barnes has been widely disseminated at Oxford University. Gregory Wildgoose, a chemist from St John's, whom I informed about my protest at Balliol in May 2009, wrote to me: 'you are a mere irrelevancy, a random and slightly irritating retard on the fringe of what is otherwise a very respectable subject.'

But let me return to Nick Cohen's article: 'His [Tomin's] most serious accusation is that British classical philosophers cannot understand Ancient Greek [without having to translate it in their heads, J.T.] ... Tomin's criticism has not been well received. "It's crap," said Jonathan Barnes. "I have absolutely no idea how he can say it."'

A parent of a student of classics wrote to Jonathan Barnes in response to Nick Cohen's article: 'I have the closest contact with some of the best of your students, and even now they are adamant that the man or woman who understands "Greek Greek" does not, with the exception of Julius Tomin, exist: certainly they do not recognize their tutors at Oxford as doing so. You yourself and your colleagues know this, you admit it among yourselves: why then, do you not have the confidence of the privileged to allow it to be told at large?'

Jonathan Barnes replied to the parent: 'What you say is a false and foolish calumny – had you made it public it would, I think, have been libellous.'

On November 26, 1989 I wrote to Jonathan Barnes: 'You deny my claim that you and your colleagues classical philosophers at Oxford do not understand Greek Greek which means that when you read Plato in the original you translate the text into English in your head. Nothing would please me more than if I learnt that I was wrong and you were right. That would put you in a position of being able to help us transform radically the teaching of Ancient Greek and Ancient Philosophy in Czechoslovakia and put it on a sound footing. Since the matter is of paramount importance, would you agree to submit yourself together with myself to a test that would establish the truth about it?'

At that time I was still allowed to give lectures and seminars at Oxford University, and so I could demonstrate to my students what kind of test I had in mind. I asked a student in my seminar on Plato at Corpus Christi to read aloud and translate a sentence from Plato's *Euthyphro*. She did well. Then I asked her to read the next sentence, which I then covered and asked: 'Tell me what you read.' She could not. I said: 'You concentrated on your reading and did not expect what I would ask next. Read the next sentence, when you finish reading it, I shall cover it and ask you to tell me what you read.' She could not do so; her reading the text aloud did not allow her to translate the text in her head.

There is a great future ahead for the study of ancient texts in the original Greek, if the approach to Ancient Greek undergoes a fundamental revolution. Understanding Greek directly gives us the possibility to open our subconscious to the influence of the language that gave birth to Homer and Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, Aristophanes, Plato and Aristotle, each of whom in their turn influenced the language. On my website you may find a number of Plato's dialogues (as well as some texts of Isocrates, Alcidamas, and St Paul) read aloud in Greek, which shows that this approach to Greek texts is possible.

My protests will have a positive message. On May 16 I shall stand in front of Balliol for about an hour with a simple poster: 'A philosopher from Prague appeals to Oxford Academics LET US DISCUSS PLATO'.