Booknotes

There is a land in which around a third of school-children, including those leaving school, 'experience great difficulties in reading and writing'; in which 150,000 young people emerge from the school system each year without any worthwhile certificates or qualifications; and in which annually over 80,000 'serious incidents' (i.e. violence, drugs, weapons trafficking, sexual attacks, and so on) are reported as occurring in educational establishments. This land is not in fact England – though *mutatis mutandis* it could well be. It is actually France, which might well dispel a few anglophone myths about the excellence of the French educational system.

What is remarkable about these figures is not just their existence, but also the fact that in 2003 they formed the core of an extremely weighty 'letter' (more a treatise, in fact), sent out by then French minister of education to all teachers in France, analysing what he saw as the dire state of French education. This is not the sort of thing a minister of education, particularly not one running a centralised state system, is supposed to do, and the minister's tenure was short. Given his straight speaking, it gives us some satisfaction to record that the minister in question was actually a professional philosopher, descending for a while into the cave of practical affairs.

Luc Ferry's return to philosophical sunlight in 2004 has allowed him to develop an ambitiously comprehensive philosophical vision, an account of which has now been published in English with a suitably Platonic title. *On Love: A Philosophy for the Twenty-First Century* (Polity Press, 2013) actually contains the same statistics which irritated the French educational establishment back in 2003, but here they are taken to represent a wider malaise in contemporary culture. For Ferry there is a wrong attitude to youth abroad, which is summed up in the old slogan from '68, 'ni vieux, ni maîtres', a 'culture' in which mature adults in eminent positions rejoice to say that they are (in spirit, one assumes) 10 years old, and in which didactic teaching and the teaching of one's cultural heritage is despised. Against this 'pupil-centered' approach, Ferry argues that 'it's not motivation or interest that need to precede work, but the opposite; it's work which, generally speaking, precedes interest. We take a real interest only in what we have already worked on a great deal. A difficult discipline – philosophy, chemistry, history, geography, or even music – becomes interesting only when we have practised it a

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great deal beforehand… and I don't know any means of getting my children to work without involving a moment of authority.'

These sagely counter-cultural thoughts are supplemented by a lament for the loss of beauty in the contemporary arts, and Ferry has an interesting account of the way that big business has combined with the bohemianism of Duchamp, Yves Klein and John Cage and their followers to permit the rise of figures such as Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. This has led to what Ferry calls 'bobo' (bourgeois-bohème) culture, exemplified in Britain by such institutions as Tate Modern and the Saatchi Gallery, in which there is a seamless convergence of public funding and of private patronage of the most meretricious 'art'. Nor is music exempt from Ferry's strictures, the all-powerful Boulez being singled out for special opprobrium; and, as if to leave us in no doubt as to Ferry's contrariness, even Picasso is criticised for having no sense of colour, leading to paintings which are 'frankly awful'. Unfortunately these abrasively heretical opinions are somewhat undermined by their author's admission that 'I have much more admiration for the Beatles or for Ray Charles or even for some songs by the Rolling Stones than I do for Boulez. They're so much more "me".'

Ah yes, 'me'. The Platonic pedagogue, this disparager of adult would-be 10 year olds, is soft at heart. His 'love' is not so very different from the mind set of many a relic from the 60s. Being French, this new philosophy for the 21st century naturally has to be dressed up in a sequence of Comtean ages, five in Ferry's case. We have gone through the ages of primitive cosmology (polytheism), of theology, of enlightenment humanism (which unfortunately had within itself elements of colonialism and racism, seeing 'primitive' societies as inferior), and finally of deconstruction and relativism (the recent well-intentioned, but ultimately nihilistic celebration of difference or *différance*). We now arrive at the fifth age, that of love, bringing with it a new secular humanism and a new spirituality, in which marriage for love replaces marriages of convenience, in which autonomy is valued, but in a society both caring and welfarist, and in which we realise that love makes life and love can go on even in the face of death. If it isn't the age of Aquarius, there are definite overtones here of 'fraternity', but with little sense of the totalitarian potential of that dangerously ambivalent doctrine.

It is not clear whether Ferry has pondered the thought of Edmund Burke, but another practicing politician-philosopher has, and has produced an interesting book on the topic. Jesse Norman is the MP for Hereford, but he has found the time to write an elegant and literate study of Burke: *Edmund Burke, Philosopher, Politician,*

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Prophet (William Collins, London 2013). Without pretending to originality, Norman places Burke's philosophical and political views firmly in their biographical and historical context, and the result is a somewhat more philosophical and nuanced picture than if one were to see Burke simply as the great polemicist of counter-revolution. While Burke would have detested the abstraction 'fraternity', this would have been because it was an abstraction, with murderous consequences. As Norman deftly shows the *idea* of fraternity, or, better its reality, or what Norman calls sociability, was at the heart of Burke's thought. For man is naturally sociable in Burke's book, and an Aristotelian *zoon politikon* to boot.

But these are sociabilities and politicisations rooted in the fabric of life as we enter it, and as it is handed on to us, and while we can change and modify these bonds which encompass our existence from the start of our lives, to attempt to wipe them away, as was done in France in the 1790s (and so many times since) is to invite tyranny to fill the space that has been cleared away. Burke's conception of our natural sociability allows him to avoid the Hobbesian idea that man is naturally at war with his fellows. It also means he has no need of a primordial social contract, be it Hobbesian or Rousseauan, which attempts to impose abstract notions of liberty, equality and fraternity on beings conceived in worryingly atomistic terms . (It would be interesting to speculate on Burkes' reaction to Ferry's fifth age of love.)

We may debate the extent to which Burke was a conservative in the modern political sense. Historically, of course, he was a Whig, a supporter of 1688 and also of the American Revolution, an opponent of Empire in India and a defender of Catholics in his native Ireland. Norman suggests that Burke's deepest political and ethical instincts were based in a hatred of tyranny and a strong sense that no man should be a judge in his own cause. The first of these instincts unites what might seem conflicting aspects the various causes to which he gave his considerable support. The second underpins his commitment to a social and political order of autonomous and balancing institutions, and his Aristotelian suspicion of any rule, whether it be by one, or by a few or by the many, which is not untempered and moderated by constraining forces and loyalties.

If Ferry proposes a form of secular humanism and Burke speaks up for a basic human sociability, in *Language, Truth and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2013), Richard Gaskin defends what he calls *literary* humanism. Like Ferry Gaskin is firmly opposed to destructive and deconstructive trends in contemporary thinking in the arts, and like Burke he is steeped in classical and literary allusion.

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All of this makes reading his book a civilised and civilising experience.

Gaskin is at pains to show, in opposition to too many recent thinkers on literature, that language is not a prison house, cut off from the world, in which we are condemned to endless spirals of self-reference. Far from cutting us off from the world, language gives us the world. It articulates the manner in which we inhabit the world, and we go wrong if we think that there is some further, hidden or inaccessible 'external world' behind what we say and think about the world. Although Gaskin refers to his view of language as linguistic idealism, he is insistent that in our speech we say things about the world, which are capable of straightforward truth or falsity. And this includes what we say in works of literature, whose statements are constituted by what their authors meant when they made them.

The claim that literature makes statements about the world which are true or false is taken by Gaskin to encompass fiction. Here, in Aristotelian vein, the statements are about universals, complex abstract objects (or abstract persons), but about whom there is much that bears on real world particular existences (i.e. us). So in considering literature, we will perforce have to consider the full human implications of the creations of their authors, including the cognitive, moral, political and religious implications. In sum, for Gaskin, the reading of literature is (or should be) a cognitive activity, on a par with scientific activity, but with its own specific character, and it should be engaged in disinterestedly for the sake of what can be learned about the world and our place in it.

Anyone at all familiar with current literary 'theory' will immediately appreciate how controversial Gaskin's claims are (even if to people not so acquainted, they might seem pretty obvious). Gaskin, though, argues for them patiently, with a wealth of actual literary example. In doing so, he demonstrates the emptiness of much of what is currently taken as sacrosanct in academic study of literature and of the arts more generally. But while recommending Gaskin's efforts as a whole, there are places where his own approach to literature seems overly literalistic, even overly philosophical. He thus criticises the widely held view that reading a work of literature can help the reader to understand what some experience he or she has not had is actually like. According to Gaskin, reading a Cormac McCarthy novel about some brutal events in the American West can 'at most (show) you what it is like to sit at home reading an exciting novel *about* those events'.

This is not just over-literalistic (and even tending in a self-enclosed Derridesque direction); it is false to the imaginative power of great

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literature. Thus more than anyone else, Dante can help the reader to enter the mind and spirit of a medieval Christian inspired by a sense of the beatific vision. But here Gaskin is unhelpfully reductive. According to him, far from helping us to appreciate the lived significance of a vision initially closed to us, because of our own cultural presuppositions, it is an 'aesthetic weakness' in *Paradise Lost* and also in *Inferno* if we don't believe the underlying theology. Gaskin seems unable to contemplate the possibility that Milton or Dante could actually help us to believe the theology – or at least to see that it is not as unbelievable as it might seem if expressed in dogmatic quasi-philosophical terms. Elsewhere, Gaskin speaks of the 'unflaggingly optimistic style' of Homer in the *Iliad*. Admirable as is his philosophic aim of placing truth at the heart of literary enquiry, for all his literary learning, there are moments where one has to question his literary sensitivity.

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