# NB

## Bred in the USA: better philosophers

David Papineau

Now that autumn is upon us, and the latest flock of academic emigrants have left for America, we are safe for a few months from articles deploring the financial squeeze on universities and explaining how difficult it has become to go on turning down offers from the United States. Not because of the money, you understand, but the morale. Of course the money will be pleasant. But what one really wants is an encouraging academic environment.

Actually, in the case of my own subject, philosophy, I am sure that the purely academic attractions are a genuine inducement. Salary differences apart, the American philosophical community is large and healthy, while British philosophy is withering. Philosophy has suffered disproportionately from the financial squeeze, and this has been reflected in the high representation of philosophers among the recent departures for the States. At the same time, I think it would be too simple to attribute the present ill-health of British philosophy entirely to the recent financial restrictions.

In themselves, the cuts in British philosophy have certainly been severe. The total number of employed philosophers has gone down by over 20 per cent from its late 1970s peak of just over 500. Four philosophy departments are being closed down. Not that anybody has actually been sacked to achieve this, however. It's all been done by "natural wastage". Retiring philosophers simply haven't been replaced with young ones. Strikingly, of the roughly 400 philosophers still in full-time employment, only eighteen are under the age of thirty-five. In effect, the philosophers who have lost their jobs are the ones who never had them.

These aren't the philosophers who are going to America: exceptional cases aside, it is very difficult for new postgraduates who haven't yet had jobs to break into the American employment market. The philosophers who are going to America are established philosophers, in the middle of their careers, many of whom have been dons at Oxford. Oxford is still by far the biggest employer of philosophers in Britain. A large proportion of Oxford undergraduates do philosophy, and nearly every college has two or more dons, each doing twelve or more tutorial hours per week, to teach them. It might seem surprising that Oxford dons should want to leave Oxford. As a "centre of excellence", and with its own endowments, Oxford has been relatively insulated from the cuts. And surely twelve hours a week chatting to bright young things ("Old Simkins was a wonderful tutor – always seemed to be asleep, but got straight to the heart of the essay every time") isn't the worst of lives. But think of it from Simkins's point of view. Forty years of the same essays, the same insights and errors. After a while, you don't *have* to be awake. Better to forsake the pleasures of High Table for a chair at a provincial university, where you give a few lectures a week, rather than a lot of tutorials. Except that in the past few years, many of the chairs in provincial universities have been frozen, and, anyway, who wants to be a professor in a shrinking department of tenured over-forties? So the departing dons go to America instead.

But, as I said, I don't think the financial cuts in provincial departments are the only reason why the dons go to America. Even in the 1950s and 60s, when British higher education had never had it so good, and provincial chairs were there for the taking, philosophers like Paul Grice, Philippa Foot, and Alisdair MacIntyre left Oxford for the States. And no doubt some will continue to go even if provincial universities eventually revive. Of course, there is the money. But there is also the desire to be where the intellectual action is, and the simple fact is that since the war, and quite apart from the cuts, American philosophy has been much better than British.

There are two related reasons for this, one to do with philosophy, and the other to do with the American educational system. By "philosophy" I mean philosophy as practised in academic philosophy departments in the English-speaking world. To an overwhelming extent, this means analytic philosophy. You can't easily define analytic philosophy, since it's essentially a tradition, characterized by such canonical figures as Hume, Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein, rather than any set of principles. But it does have various characteristic features. It takes care with arguments and concepts. It has a positivist respect for the natural sciences. It has a yearning for foundations, and looks to the philosophy of mind, or the theory of knowledge, or the analysis of language, to provide them.

Paradoxically, although the analytic tradition dominates Anglophone philosophy departments, it's arguably not the dominant philosophical tradition in Anglophone universities as a whole. When scholars in departments of literature and cultural studies want philosophical illumination, they don't turn to Hume's or Russell's careful analytical reconstructions of the natural world. Instead they look to the Continental philosophical tradition of Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger, a tradition which emphasizes the creative powers of the human mind over the constraints imposed by the natural world. Thus when Allan Bloom, in his recent anti-modernist polemic, *The Closing of the American Mind*, accuses American universities of corruption by Continental philosophy, he means the literary and cultural scholars, not the philosophers in the philosophy departments. Bloom thinks it a terrible thing that so many young Americans are imbibing German relativism from their literature teachers and being taught that there is no authority beyond your own perspective. Richard Rorty, on the other hand, argues in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) that the intellectual authoritarianism of analytic philosophy has been discredited, and that the philosophers in the philosophy departments would do a lot better to adopt the free-wheeling Continental ways themselves. But whatever the relative merits of the two traditions, it remains the case that, as things now stand, the philosophers in the philosophy departments are committed to analytic rigour and foundationalism, and have little time for Continental theorizing. As Clark Glymour, Professor of Philosophy at Carnegie-Mellon in Pitts-

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## At Cheltenham

Simon Rae

Despite the long, if largely apocryphal, history of satanic accompaniments to productions of the play, it would be unreasonable to attribute the electrical storm which partially flooded the Town Hall on the first night of the Cheltenham Festival to ATC's *Faustus* (adapted and directed by Mark Brickman). With Faustus (Peter Linford) played as a repressed, bespectacled don, spurred on by a languorously seductive Mephistophilis (George Anton) in the novel guise of a pretty blackshirt, the play inevitably lost much of the Promethean dimension. David Westhead (Beelzebub/Wagner/Chorus/Pope/Charon. . .) completed this brilliantly versatile trio, whose interpretation of Marlowe's classic drama will remain in the memory for long time – but as a black comedy rather than a great tragedy.

The Poetry Competition lunch, at which the editor of the *TLS*, Jeremy Treglown, introduced his fellow judges and the successful poets, was very well attended and notable for strong readings of the six prize-winning poems and excellent food (including a particularly delicious syllabub) prepared from historic recipes supplied by another participating author, Jane Grigson. Later the same afternoon, Nicholas Parsons set sail on "the syllabub sea" of Edward Lear's "Nonsensical Genius", reciting all the old favourites for a doting audience of, as they say, children of all ages, while Michael Hardwick, at the end of an amiable after-dinner speech entitled "My Friend and Colleague, Mr Sherlock Holmes", described the world-wide cult of the great detective, to which he has contributed as much as anyone since Conan Doyle himself, as "a lot of nonsense . . . wonderful nonsense".

With equally engaging candour, David Edgar admitted that his first thought on being asked to adapt *Nicholas Nickleby* for the stage was "Isn't that the one with Mrs Gamp in it?" Several readings later, and in partnership with the RSC's forty-strong company, he produced arguably the best eight and a half hours' theatre of the decade, and here gave an audience, kept on tenterhooks by the erratic response of the video machines showing excerpts from the show, an insight into the problems presented by Dickens's unique narrative voice, and dialogue written for the eye rather than the ear, along with all the other facets of the original that had to be accommodated to "the exigencies of the theatrical".

No bald and necessarily incomplete summary can hope to do justice to the range, complexity and personal force of George Steiner's Cheltenham Lecture, "Constraints", in which he considered the "vexing difficulties" of censorship. While instigating the agreeable fiction that he and his audience were "sitting round a table together" in collaborative pursuit of elusive answers, Steiner made clear his trenchant opposition to the libertarian licence so blatantly exploited by today's pornography industry, deploring "the mounds of cruel filth that threaten our culture". Regarding serious literature, Steiner questioned, albeit "tentatively", the benefits writers derived from their recent release from social, political or religious constraints. The world's greatest artists, all of whom had worked under greater or lesser degrees of censorship, had, he found, based their art in a profound respect for their subjects' innermost privacy, the "zone of inviolate opaqueness". There was no need to follow characters into "the bedroom, the bathroom – or the operating theatre". Nor did such reticence result in any diminution of "the sexual charge". He cited *Anna Karenina*, and remarked of *Middlemarch* that George Eliot "had nothing to learn from Freud".

The issue was raised at the end of the "Meet the Author" session with Ian McEwan, who had been reading two lengthy passages from *The Child in Time*. He "disagreed profoundly" with Steiner, believing there were "no doors, no thresholds" a novelist should not be able to cross. "We simply have to feel free . . ."

## The light of midnight

In the first of a new series on publishing houses **David Coward** looks at Éditions de Minuit and its promotion of experimental and radical intellectual writing.

In Paris in 1941, Jean Bruller, an illustrator who was to become famous as the novelist "Vercors", wrote a subtle portrait of a "good" German for serialization in a clandestine paper. When the paper's printer was arrested, Bruller found another, and in 1942, 350 laboriously produced copies of *Le Silence de la mer* were issued. Financial backing was found for other titles and Les Éditions de Minuit was launched. Paul Eluard became chief literary advisor and authors like Mauriac, Aragon and Gide were recruited. Minuit books were of necessity short, pseudonymous and limited to print-runs of 1,000 or 2,000 copies, though they circulated widely in roneoed or even handwritten form. Minuit's forty wartime titles had a considerable impact on morale and the venture was awarded the Prix Fémina in 1944 for keeping the channels of free expression open.

Of course, a record of honourable resistance was no guarantee of commercial survival in the post-war world. Famous names went to the wall as older houses reclaimed their position and newer imprints – Julliard, Laffont, La Table Ronde – now appeared. 1946 proved a turning-point for Minuit. First, it took on Georges Bataille, who founded *Critique* (which it still publishes), an influential highbrow magazine aimed at presenting "a living synthesis of contemporary culture". Second, Georges Lambrichs was given the task of attracting new authors. In the years that followed, he snapped up a number of authors – Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Butor – who had been rejected by other publishers (mainly by Gallimard. After the departure of "Vercors" in 1948, the firm was bought by its former production manager, Jérôme Lindon, who proved an enthusiastic patron of the *nouveau roman* – which virtually became a house product. Beckett, Robbe-Grillet and Pinget have remained almost exclusively Minuit authors while Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Claude Simon, Claude Ollier and Monique Wittig, prestigious names in the "new realism" movement, have all appeared between the familiar plain white, blue-lettered covers of a firm which has maintained a strong reputation as a quality publisher of experimental fiction and rather stern, usually radical intellectualism.

Quality publishing, of course, is risky, and high standards usually bring low returns. The acquisition in 1951 of Jacques Hillairet's steady-selling guides to old Paris (the latest update came out in 1985) proved a useful insurance until the backlist was established. Even so, Minuit went through some hard times and in 1955 Lambrichs accepted a better offer elsewhere. The same year, Lindon won the backing of Le Centre des Lettres for an edition of Diderot's *Correspondance* (fifteen volumes, 1955-70) and Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur* won the Prix des Critiques – though – only 700 copies were printed of his next book, *La Jalousie* (1957). With Lindon now in sole charge, and with a backlist that included Bataille and Blanchot and that would go on to attract foreign intellectuals (Jacobson, Cassirer, Marcuse, E. H. Carr, Panofsky), Minuit became a bastion of high intellect.

The literary prizes which do so much to boost sales in France began to come more frequently: Butor (1957, 1960), Ollier (1958), Pinget (1963, 1965), Wittig (1964) and so forth. Lindon's policy remained the same. Preferring to nurse particular authors rather than embark on ambitious programmes, his list has continued to be small but select: in 1985, there were about thirty new titles and twenty or so in 1986. He regarded the *livre de poche* as a threat to creativity, was unenthusiastic about the book clubs and has never been a great advertiser. He did diversify, however: setting up a retail outlet, establishing new "Collections" (each a series of books on a given theme or approach) and adding to *Critique* three other reviews in the 1970s and a couple in the past four years. And as the "new realism" faded, he continued to seek out fresh talent. He launched Tony Duvert in 1967 and, in the 1980s, Eugene Savitzkaya and Jean Echenoz (who won the Prix Medici in 1983, for *Cherokee*) and is now toying with the "Roman-photo", which aims at non-verbal visual narrative.

Minuit's greatest success in recent times has been Duras's *L'Amant*, which won the Prix Goncourt in 1984, stayed in the bestseller lists for twenty-eight weeks and had world sales of a million and a half in the first year. Though Duras's next title also figured briefly in the top ten, as did Jean-Philippe Toussaint's "roman post-nouveau" *La Salle de bain* (1985), Minuit titles generally do not seem particularly at home in the bestseller lists. Even the "Double" series, which repackages sturdy sellers from the backlist, has a rather austere image. Minuit, which distributes through Éditions du Seuil, is still keeping the important channels of communication open. Uncompromising, fiercely independent, seeking the best of what is original and serious, Les Éditions de Minuit goes its way lit by the star and lower-case *m* which have indicated its imprint for more than forty years.

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burgh, says on the first page of his *Theory and Evidence* (1980), "If it is true that there are but two kinds of people in the world – the logical positivists and the god-damned English professors – then I suppose that I am a logical positivist."

One result of the divide between the two traditions is that analytic philosophy has become highly technical. This isn't just a matter of an emphasis on such specialized subjects as the philosophy of logic, science and mathematics, though there is such an emphasis. The technicality also affects the way analytic philosophers address the central, non-specialist questions of epistemology and metaphysics. Thus, when Hilary Putnam argues that there is no gap between the objective world and the world as humans find it, he rests his argument on a deep theorem of mathematical logic, the Lowenheim-Skolem result that any satisfiable first-order theory has a denumerable model. When Saul Kripke argues that the mind can't be identical to the brain, his reasoning depends on a highly original logical analysis of the way names and definite descriptions behave in modal contexts. To understand what Donald Davidson says about meaning, you need to know how the logician Alfred Tarski constructed truth-predicates for formalized languages. To work on probability or causation, you need to grasp the structure of quantum mechanics.

Of course not every philosophical argument that appeals to difficult technical assumptions is a good argument. There are cases where technical sophistication serves only to hide bad thinking. It is arguable, for instance – and Ian Hacking argues it in his *Representing and Intervening* (1983) – that any half-way competent logician could drive a truck through the holes in Putnam's use of the Lowenheim-Skolem theorem. On the other hand, it is equally arguable that Kripke's and Davidson's uses of logical theory will make a lasting mark on Western philosophy, and that quantum mechanics will bring about a permanent change in our concept of causation.

In any case, and whatever the rights and wrongs of the particular arguments, it's clear that if you are going to be any good at this kind of philosophy, you'd better not be the kind of person who goes weak at the knees when you see symbols and equations. This is where the second part of the explanation of the superiority of American philosophy comes in. In the American educational system there is much less, and much later, specialization than in Britain. British children often start being steered towards a purely arts or purely science curriculum as early as thirteen or fourteen. Kenneth Baker's proposed "national curriculum" will probably do something to block such premature channelling. But even after his proposed reforms, the standard pattern will still be to opt entirely either for science or for arts at A levels, and to continue similarly at university; and as a result many intelligent and academic children will still have no contact with any science or mathematics beyond fifteen or sixteen. In America, on the other hand, even the university degrees are less specialized than an average British A level programme. American undergraduates do a number of different subjects, often being required to cover both sciences and arts, and only concentrate on their "major" subject in their last year. When specialist training is needed, they get it in graduate school, where they do two years of intensive course-work before they are allowed to start on independent research.

The effect on British and American philosophy is as you would expect. In Britain, philosophy training is tailored to undergraduates who mostly have a minimal scientific background, and it tends to avoid the harder reaches of contemporary American work. In America, the essential philosophical curriculum is taught at graduate school, and is designed for somewhat maturer students, with a broad background covering science as well as arts. Of course British professional philosophers catch up on the necessary techniques when they need them for their research. But, still, the technical stuff isn't regarded as an essential part of a philosophical education, and this puts British philosophy at a disadvantage.

As it happens, it is Oxford among British universities that approximates most closely to the American system. Surprisingly, you can't do philosophy on its own as an undergraduate at Oxford, but only as part of Greats, or PPE, or in a joint degree with mathematics, or physics, or modern languages, or psychology, or theology. In compensation, there is a two-year taught postgraduate degree, the BPhil, which was set up after the war under the aegis of Gilbert Ryle, to provide specialist training in philosophy. But even this doesn't really work. The Oxford dons still have to do their twelve undergraduate tutorials a week for their colleges, and don't always have a lot of time to put into postgraduate teaching. And then there's the problem of expertise again. Oxford colleges expect their dons to be competent across the undergraduate board (one don told me recently that he has a repertoire of over a hundred undergraduate topics) and so the colleges would prefer to appoint good philosophical generalists rather than specialists with technical skills to impart.

The American system of higher education isn't just good at training professional philosophers. It has quite general advantages over the British system of single-subject undergraduate degrees. After all, relatively few students in any area make careers as specialists in their subjects, and those that don't would surely be far better served by multi-subject degrees. And the minority who are going to be specialists can be much better taught in graduate school than in less demanding undergraduate courses.

If anything good is to come of the financial cut-backs in British universities, perhaps it will be by shaking them up in the direction of the American model. Up to a point, this is already happening by accident: overseas students paying high fees are now very attractive to British universities, and there is some pressure to make adjustments to accommodate them. In general, perhaps it is right to worry about the arbitrary imposition of American customs. But in the case of the British university system, it doesn't seem to me that a small dose of American cultural imperialism will do any harm.

# Undermining an authority

## Susan James

**BARRY BRUNDELL**
**Pierre Gassendi**: From Aristotelianism to a new natural philosophy
251pp. Reidel/Kluwer, PO Box 989, 3300 AZ Dordrecht, The Netherlands. £49.
90 277 2428 8

Portraits of Pierre Gassendi are unusual among those of seventeenth-century philosophers for their cheerfulness. Unlike his contemporary Descartes, for example, who fixes us with a piercing and troubled eye, Gassendi smiles out shrewdly, observer and participant in the human comedy. Nothing could be more appropriate, one might think, for a dedicated follower of Epicurus. But the image does not of course conform to the grave stereotype of the famous philosopher, and it is perhaps by that stereotype that Gassendi and his works have been judged. For he has been largely forgotten, bypassed by an essentially ahistorical approach to philosophy and neglected by all but a small band of scholars.

Barry Brundell's absorbing book is part of an attempt to rescue him from this undeserved condition and revive a sympathetic understanding of his achievements. Such recent studies of Gassendi as there have been have tended, in Brundell's view, to cram their hero into assorted categories which he conspicuously fails to fit – sceptic, empiricist, covert atheist and so on – with the predictable result that they have failed to capture the richness and complexity of his thought. To overcome this limitation, Brundell suggests, we should pay more attention to the relation between Gassendi's life-work and his aims; we should try to recover his own conception of his intellectual project and ask what he saw himself as doing. For only when we have grasped the function of his philosophy will we be able to interpret it unanachronistically.

This tactic offers us a means of imposing some shape on an *oeuvre* which may well appear bafflingly diverse. Gassendi was the author of an attack on Aristotelian philosophy, a translation of Book X of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, a massive reply to Descartes's *Meditations*, a series of what we should call scientific papers, a biography of the humanist Peiresc, a dismissal of the work of Robert Fludd, and a major Epicurean treatise, the *Syntagmum Philosophicum*. Brundell argues that the principal theme of this corpus is explicit in Gassendi's earliest work, *Exercitationes paradoxicae adversus Aristoteleos*, and that all his subsequent writings should be seen as a prolonged attempt to undermine the authority of Aristotelianism. His search for a superior theory led him first to Copernican astronomy, and it was only the condemnation of Galileo, combined with Gassendi's unshakeable commitment to the Catholic church, which persuaded him to abandon this line of inquiry. Instead, he embarked on a study of Epicurus, which occupied him for the rest of his life and in time gave rise to his belief that, since Epicureanism shared all the strengths of Aristotelianism and had more besides, it should be adopted as an official philosophy.

Brundell's thesis has a lot to recommend it. It provides a valuable and integrated analysis of Gassendi's entire career, while also illuminating several more specific problems of interpretation. It stresses, for instance, that Gassendi's interest in scepticism never caused him to waver over Christian doctrine, and offers a persuasive account of the connection between what we should distinguish as his more scientific and his more metaphysical pieces. Gassendi remains, however, an eclectic figure who evades this further attempt to bundle him into a single box. While a desire to topple Aristotelianism was undoubtedly among his motives, it alone does not sufficiently explain the character of his mature work, which, as Brundell has to concede, is indebted to the Stoics and to contemporary scientific discoveries, as well as to a Christianized version of Epicurus.

This imposes strains on Brundell's argument, but also raises a series of fascinating questions about the role of Epicurus in Gassendi's philosophy. We know that Gassendi displayed a humanist's concern to get Epicurus right, painstakingly collecting and comparing texts and translations. At the same time, however, he used Epicurus as a vehicle, unconcernedly bringing him up to date when necessary, slotting in the conclusions of other schools where appropriate, yet always calling the result "Epicurean". Why, one might wonder, did Gassendi choose to hang his views on Epicurus, or, indeed, on anyone at all? To put the problem more abstractly, what did he see as the advantages of practising philosophy in a historical mode?

An answer to this question might yield further insights into his intentions, and could thus be used to refine the account already given by Brundell. It could also increase our understanding of the range of intellectual traditions from which seventeenth-century philosophers drew both the substance and the manner of their arguments. At the moment our grasp of these issues is often limited and shaky. Brundell is therefore quite right when he claims that the study of Gassendi's work can cast light on our picture of the intellectual climate of the seventeenth century, and his book is a tenacious and engaging contribution to that task.

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*Berkeley: An introduction*, by Jonathan Dancy, has recently been published (165pp. Oxford: Blackwell. £17.50; paperback, £5.95. 0 631 14525 7). Dancy assumes no previous knowledge of philosophy, and the book is intended to be "accessible to first-year students and to the interested general reader".