

Philosophic Fashions of Penultimate Times

by strannikov

Until recently, I was stuck on the notion of living in eschatological times. I myself was willing to risk the imprecision of speaking of “apocalypse fever” breaking out here and there around the globe, since . . . some while ago: but now I think those days have passed and that we live instead in penultimate times, which I take to mean that whenever The End does arrive (and with whatever activating agent, should there be time for any sequence to elapse), we generally will be unable to respond to its advent in any ready fashion.

Thus minded, I began a search for an academic treatment of necromancy in the ancient world other than Ogden's sourcebook of Greek and Roman material and came upon this reference to Lucian in Filoramo's History of Gnosticism (Alcock tr., 21):

Lucian, an acute and sceptical observer of his time, depicts the changing spiritual climate vividly and with subtle irony. From behind a screen of disparaging accusations, his ‘group photography’ depicts the typical representatives of a religious world in ferment. His writings are full of itinerant preachers, prophets bearing divine messages, Christians thirsting for martyrdom, ‘theomaniacs’ and ‘holy sinners’. These people have a new rapport with the divine: they represent a sort of barometer of the profound changes taking place in religious mentality.

All well and good but no word about necromancy in the ancient world: still, it's good to give Lucian credit he's earned. I'm willing to credit Lucian for disparaging the philosophies of his age at least as eagerly as I'm keen to appreciate his assessments of the religious

claims of his marvelous day: they all inspire reflection on the philosophical and religious claims of other ages and other days.

Lucian's interrogations of Platonic and Pythagorean, Stoic and Cynic, Aristotelian and Peripatetic and Epicurean philosophies lead me to wonder what counts today as our reigning philosophical style or fashion. (As Lucian depicts it, philosophy is never perennial, it emerges in blurts, permits only punctuated views belched intermittently. [Lucian enjoys the advantage of having trained briefly in philosophy: at least, he confesses to his engaging conversation with Nigrinus the Platonist.]

What are or would be the names of our reigning philosophies today, what dominant schools inform and lead our intellectual efforts, inspire our blissful reveries, inflame our breathless humanity?

Taking a bookstore philosophy shelf as a true metaphor of the marketplace of ideas, what are we likely to've found on any recent day? A decent store's shelf might hold competing translations of Plato's Republic, some samples of Aristotle not yet remaindered, Machiavelli's Prince, maybe Hobbes's Leviathan, copious editions of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard translated also by several hands, something dreadful from Ayn Rand, probably something lingering by or about Marx, maybe some Rawls, maybe Popper (never Feyerabend), possibly Rorty, maybe Dewey (though pragmatism per se looks an abandoned enterprise these days), maybe Quine, something revered of Jean-Paul's if not also Albert's.

Kant? Not imperatively. Hegel? Not likely. Schopenhauer? Not reliably, unless it's the Dover edition of World as Will and Representation, though only volume I or volume II will be available. If Spinoza, then not Descartes. If not Locke, then neither Leibniz. If Leibniz, then not Berkeley. Seldom Hume. Never Feyerabend. Not reliably Heidegger or Husserl, except as the philosophy shelf bleeds into scarce shelves of literary study. Often no Wittgenstein, no Russell of any consequence.

Surprise: philosophy occupies the spot it occupied in Lucian's day. After whatever mix of titles and names noted above, most titles

adorning philosophy book spines speak bluntly and profoundly of philosophy's current relevance and its prowess for cataloging artifacts of contemporary popular culture: "Philosophy and—" titles far outnumber traditional treatises and monographs: philosophy and rock 'n' roll (or supply the name of the band), philosophy and (here, the cable television franchise of your choosing), philosophy and (here, the movie franchise that endures with dread persistence). Philosophy and film. Philosophy and sports. Philosophy and food. Philosophy and coffee. Philosophy and fashion. Philosophy . . .

Philosophy is only relevant today, merely topical: in its deep engagement with contemporaneity through programming and marketing schedules, philosophy poses no threat whatever of being deemed perennial, much less eternal: so wedded to mammonized time and chronometry as to be incapable of leading the addled, the perplexed, or the merely curious to any eternal bliss or any alarming earthly truth.

-END-

