

THINKING OTHERWISE

Bouveresse and the French Tradition

JACQUES BOUVERESSE is perhaps best known in the Anglophone world for being among the least well-known of contemporary French thinkers. Of the same generational cohort as Badiou, Rancière, Debray and Balibar during Althusser's reign at the École Normale Supérieure, a long-standing friend and interlocutor of Bourdieu, elected in 1995 to the chair of Philosophy of Language and Epistemology at the Collège de France, his work has been translated into Italian, German, Spanish and Japanese, but so far rather little has appeared in English. Paradoxically, one reason for this may be the antagonistic stance he has generally adopted toward his native philosophical milieu: 'Why I am so very unFrench' was the title beneath which he introduced his work to the Anglosphere in the 1980s.

Badiou has famously characterized the moment of postwar French philosophy as encompassing 'a new appropriation of German thought, a vision of science as creativity, a radical political engagement and a search for new forms in art and life.' Against this, Bouveresse has looked to Austria, rather than Germany; valued mathematical logic and discounted any heroic role for science; adopted a politics of modest reformism; and eschewed the seductions of performative rhetoric in favour of clarity and precision. Yet as the dominant modes of French philosophy have changed—existentialism, structuralism, post-structuralism, 'new philosophy', neo-Kantianism—Bouveresse's relation to it has adjusted too. An outline reconstruction of his work may help to provide a view of French philosophy—its habitus, as Bourdieu would say—from the perspective of one of its fiercest internal critics, and offer the basis for a preliminary critical assessment of his own achievements.

Born in 1940, one of nine children, on a small farm high up in the Franche-Comté near the Swiss border, Bouveresse attended a village primary school and, as a child, helped out looking after the animals. His forebears were Swiss Catholics who had relocated across the frontier to the land of their co-religionists in the sixteenth century. The family was somewhat singled out—‘glorious’ figures, according to the local sarcasm—by its education: a grandmother had received a higher diploma, an uncle was a priest, an aunt a nun. Bouveresse, rather staggeringly, had read the entire Bible at the age of seven. On his own account, his early outlook was marked by a fervent anti-militarism and an idealism so extreme it was almost a denial of his lived reality. At eleven, he plumped to enter the junior seminary at Besançon, fifteen miles away, where he acquired the habit of hard, intensive study as a defence against the misery of daily life.² His father, highly intelligent, had been a militant of the Catholic Young Farmers movement, an important force in this politically and religiously conservative region; dedicated to his work on the farm, he was also drawn to intellectual questions. Bouveresse recalled the two of them discussing Berkeley’s philosophy as they toiled in a field, armed with picks, dismantling a heap of pebbles. His father brought his pick down hard on a stone and asked if Jacques really thought that wasn’t real, but just a complex of sensations?³ Bouveresse would bring to Paris something of the same attitude towards the endeavours of philosophers that he has attributed to his father: a mixture of ironizing—‘fishing for the moon’, in his father’s phrase—with a certain respect, ‘above all, not wanting to give them an excessive importance.’³

At seventeen, after the *baccalauréat*, Bouveresse went on to study scholastic philosophy for two years, still planning to enter the senior seminary at Besançon—Julien Sorel’s social springboard in *The Red and the Black*—and train for the priesthood. But it was now that he experienced a painful crisis of faith: he could no longer share in the necessary religious exaltation or take the formal expressions of devotion seriously; he was suspected of being ‘too intellectual’, to the detriment of the spiritual side. By 1959 his religious vocation was over. Instead, now with

¹ Alain Badiou, ‘The Adventure of French Philosophy’, NLR 35, Sept–Oct 2005, p. 71. See also Fredric Jameson, ‘Badiou and the French Tradition’, NLR 102, Nov–Dec 2016. My thanks to Peter Dews for his helpful comments on an earlier draft.

² Bouveresse, *Le Philosophe et le réel: Entretiens avec Jean-Jacques Rosat*, Paris 1998, pp. 55–8, 68; henceforth PR.

³ PR, p. 60.

two top-grade *baccalauréats* to his credit, Bouveresse was advised to take the high road of preparation for the *grandes écoles*. He won a place at the intensely competitive Lycée Lakanal, on the southern outskirts of Paris, where his uncle the priest was a chaplain. Here, the class contrast was stark. His fellow-students seemed infinitely more cultured, self-assured and better read, remarkable to a farm boy not only for their quickness but for their cheek. Bouveresse's defence was once again to throw himself into intensive reading, now of general culture. He already had good German and immersed himself in its literature, expressionist poetry—Gottfried Benn, Trakl—as well as the classics. His German teacher, a young Communist, introduced him to Brecht, through whom he discovered the voluminous writings of Karl Kraus.⁴

In 1961 Bouveresse entered the École Normale Supérieure. If Sartre still dominated the public sphere in this period, Althusser reigned supreme at the rue d'Ulm. Bouveresse has described the milieu of the ENS at that time as deeply disconcerting for the country youth he still was, encountering a cohort of great sophistication and philosophical brilliance, from whom he felt politically and culturally very much apart. Although on concrete political questions his views were not so different from those of Althusser's students, he was wary of 'what intellectuals understood by political engagement', sceptical of 'systematic political solutions'.⁵ Of his distance from the PCF Bouveresse remarked: 'I had already known one religion and had the strong impression this was another.' In general orientation, he defined himself as 'a man of the left of reformist rather than revolutionary tendency', seeking to defend good causes, victims and the oppressed, but with little confidence in existing political movements—and so, 'somewhat solitary'.⁶ Later he would joke that his fellow students—Badiou, Rancière, Debray—had a military conception of philosophy: 'We descend from the hills and launch waves of assault.'⁷

As Bouveresse has acknowledged, however, there was no sectarianism in Althusser's direction of the school: the widest range of thinkers

⁴ PR, pp. 69–71.

⁵ PR, pp. 74, 77, 72; see also Bouveresse, *Bourdieu, savant et politique*, Marseille 2003, where he describes himself as close to Althusser's students politically, though not philosophically: p. 58.

⁶ PR, p. 73.

⁷ 'Interview with Jacques Bouveresse' (trans. modified), in *Concept and Form*, vol. II: *Interviews and Essays on Cahiers pour l'analyse*, Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, eds, London and New York 2012, p. 256.

were recruited, including rationalists like Gilles Gaston Granger and Jules Vuillemin, another son of rural Franche-Comté, who introduced Bouveresse to Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein. Through Vuillemin's classes, he discovered 'a new way of doing philosophy: clearer, more precise, more technical'; Frege's logic, in particular, offered a model of 'sobriety and precision'.⁸ There was also a contrarian spirit at work: if the Althusserians categorized Anglo-Saxon philosophy as 'essentially an expression of capitalism, technocracy and political conformism'—albeit without underestimating its influence—Bouveresse set about systematically working through all the thinkers they dis-recommended. It sufficed to open the books of Mach, Russell or Carnap to find that what he had been told about those authors was a gross simplification—and 'in philosophy as elsewhere, the principal difficulty is still to persuade people simply to open the books.'⁹

At the same time, relations with both structuralists and post-structuralists were 'correct', as the French would say. After the *agrégation*—in which Bouveresse was placed first in his year, qualifying in literature (Latin, Greek, French and German) as well as philosophy—he taught the course in formal logic at the Sorbonne for ten years, while working on his thesis on Wittgenstein. This was published by Éditions de minuit as *Le Mythe de l'intériorité: Expérience, signification et langage privé chez Wittgenstein* in 1976. Earlier articles had already appeared in the leading Althusserian review, *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, and in *Critique*, famed journal of the post-structuralists, to which Bouveresse was recommended by Foucault in 1968 as a reviewer of Vuillemin's work on Aristotle, and for which he wrote—on Peirce, Popper, Kraus, Cantor, Wittgenstein, Gödel, Frege, Dummett—throughout the seventies.¹⁰ Of his position within the field of French philosophy at this time, he has said he was regarded by the structuralists as 'competent and worthy'; there was a certain respect for formal logic, which was at least preferable to

⁸ PR, pp. 81, 101. It was at this time, too, that Bouveresse first encountered Bourdieu, ten years his senior, then based at Lille and teaching a seminar on empirical sociology at the ENS: p. 76. Though Bouveresse has often insisted on his sense of alterity from this milieu, the summit of the French education system in the sixties was comparatively open: Granger was the son of a carpenter, Bourdieu of a postman; Balibar's father was a village primary-school teacher.

⁹ PR, pp. 83–4.

¹⁰ A selection of the early essays appeared as *La Parole malheureuse* (1973) from Éditions de minuit, Bouveresse's publisher through the seventies and eighties. For Foucault's role in introducing him to *Critique*, see PR, p. 119.

'humanism'.¹¹ Meanwhile *Le Mythe de l'intériorité* was flanked by a growing number of companion studies on different aspects of Wittgenstein's thought: anthropology, iconography, religion, aesthetics, architecture, music, Freud, modernity and the idea of progress.

Bringing Wittgenstein to Paris

Over seven hundred pages long, *Le Mythe de l'intériorité* operated at one level as a general introduction to Wittgenstein's work, from the *Tractatus* to 'On Certainty', though the main concentration—four sections out of five—is on the 'second' Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In the UK, the arc of ordinary-language philosophy had already entered its descent phase when Bouveresse's book appeared in 1976, having risen from its vanguard outpost in Wittgenstein's Cambridge rooms in the inter-war period to a position of enormous influence over English philosophy departments in the fifties and sixties, provoking Gellner's devastating polemic, *Words and Things*, in 1959.¹² In France, by contrast, the movement had made little mark—unsurprisingly perhaps, as a reviewer of *Le Mythe de l'intériorité* pointed out, given not only the nature of Wittgenstein's work, the vast mass of posthumously collected notes and aphorisms, often oracular in style, but also his deliberate rupture with the classical philosophical tradition, his refusal to elaborate even the most preliminary hypothesis or theory, his rejection of any philosophy of history, his denial that philosophy might have a role to play in proof or explanation and his sapping of the categories by which philosophers philosophize.¹³

The result was to leave the field wide open for Bouveresse. The sheer scale of *Le Mythe de l'intériorité*, his most comprehensive statement on Wittgenstein, inevitably had a hegemonizing effect: henceforth it would be hard to speak of the Viennese thinker in France—or of analytical philosophy more broadly—without reference to Bouveresse. The book also contained a distinctive philosophical argument. Bouveresse's earlier forays into ordinary-language philosophy had explored ways in which attention to linguistic usage—an index of 'collective praxis'—could

¹¹ PR, pp. 78–9.

¹² Ernest Gellner, *Words and Things: An Examination of, and an Attack on, Linguistic Philosophy*, London 2005.

¹³ Robert Maggiori, 'Wittgenstein, mode d'emploi, bis', *Libération*, 26 September 1987, reviewing the second edition of *Le Mythe de l'intériorité*.

eliminate so much philosophical baggage: misconceived questions, tendentious assumptions, and so on.¹⁴ His aim in *Le Mythe de l'intériorité*, in a move familiar from the Anglophone ordinary-language approach, was to mobilize Wittgenstein's understanding of the public role of language for an assault on Descartes's idea of a pure *cogito* and associated notions of the privacy of mental phenomena—the myth of 'interiority', in which thoughts and feelings operate without any necessary reference to a real, extra-mental world.

Wittgenstein's later work offered the basis for an alternative perspective, Bouveresse argued. Language was indissociable from 'thinking', 'feeling', 'sensing', and philosophers could not afford to ignore it. Humans learn to think in communication with other subjects; language, the inter-subjective medium through which they do so, is key to how they think about themselves and the world. Through language, in other words, thinking is necessarily public. There is no pure *cogito ego*, there is only 'a declaration made in a constitutively impure language', which others understand 'to the extent that they master the public concept of what it is to be an *I* and of what it is *to think*'. What characterized the philosophical method, for Wittgenstein, was 'the fact that there was nothing "hidden" to exhume, that everything was in principle immediately accessible to the surface, and that we already knew, in a way, everything we needed to know'.¹⁵ In the master's words, 'Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain.'¹⁶ The job of the philosopher, then, was to put the pieces together in the clearest possible way, by 'attending to' language.

Advance of knowledge?

Bouveresse has confessed that it was Wittgenstein's 'anthropological eye' that 'seduced' him: the attention paid to trivia and language games—like the building workers with their blocks and beams in *Philosophical Investigations*—by 'a philosopher of the ordinary, the concrete, the

¹⁴ Bouveresse, 'Langage ordinaire et philosophie', *Langages*, 21 March 1971, p. 64. This and other essays on Wittgenstein were collected in his first book, *La Parole malheureuse: De l'alchimie linguistique à la grammaire philosophique*, Paris 1971.

¹⁵ Bouveresse, *Le Mythe de l'intériorité: Expérience, signification et langage privé chez Wittgenstein*, Paris 1976, pp. xiii, 9.

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [1953], Malden, MA 2009, sec. 126, p. 55.

practical.¹⁷ For the most part, he seemed also to have accepted Wittgenstein's ultra-quietist limitation of purpose: 'Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language, so it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot justify it either. It leaves everything as it is.'¹⁸ For Bouveresse, too, the task of philosophy is not to create concepts or 'to acquire or communicate new theoretical knowledge'. Instead, it is to 'attain clarity', to 'filter out non-sense'. It addresses *how* rather than *what* people think. He has identified himself with Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical practice as therapy, defining it as 'an activity or an exercise that one first practises on one's self, bearing on the way in which one sees the world and what one expects from it, a work of self-analysis and reform, which one can eventually help others to undertake, but which each needs to practice for themselves.'¹⁹

Bouveresse has remained uneasy, though, about Wittgenstein's insistence that philosophy had nothing to do with science, in the broadest sense. The acquisition of knowledge about the external world, and formulation of theories about it, were explicitly excluded from his philosophical practice. 'Our considerations could not be scientific ones', Wittgenstein wrote in *Philosophical Investigations*. 'And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place.' Philosophical problems 'are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known.'²⁰ Bouveresse has tried to gloss this in a number of different ways. He maintains that it is not enough for philosophy to examine thought and language: it must also account for humans' relationship to the natural world and so requires an open dialogue with science. He speaks of philosophy's mission 'to defend the aim of knowledge' and understand objective reality,²¹ proposing a notion of scientific realism: in as much as one can speak of a knowledge of things in themselves, science tries to acquire it—and, up to a certain point, succeeds.²² More than this, he has welcomed the 'exemplary' character of scientific initiative, not just as an aspect of objective knowledge but because he holds that it offers a much better model than literature of what 'democracy in intellectual matters' might be.²³

¹⁷ PR, 112.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 124, p. 50.

¹⁹ PR, 121–2.

²⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 109, p. 47.

²¹ PR, p. 49.

²² PR, p. 49.

²³ PR, p. 48.

Bouveresse has made valiant attempts to re-cast Wittgenstein's later philosophy in realist terms, even where this involves a circular argument. 'I have always considered Wittgenstein to be a realist in the clearest sense of the term', he has said, 'as someone who has never been tempted by the idea that language doesn't succeed in entering into contact with an independent reality':

For Wittgenstein, if we can't construct an interesting philosophical theory, or even say something substantial about the relation between language and reality, that doesn't mean this relation doesn't exist . . . Ridding ourselves of chimerical constructs or philosophical mythologies doesn't change our idea that reality is independent of language and that language succeeds in representing it, since that idea—or rather, that image—is present in our linguistic practice, and he never suggests that it's contestable or illegitimate. He writes somewhere that an image that is fundamental to our whole conception of the world must be respected, and not treated as a superstition. Perhaps the realist image of a reality external to language and independent from it, but which it can represent, has that status of a fundamental image.²⁴

He has likewise argued that Wittgenstein believed 'in the priority and independence of nature with respect to culture', thus establishing a distance from conventionalist readings of the philosopher, in which meaning is grounded in shared agreements 'that it is so', rather than in representations of external reality. If 'convention presupposes nature', then it becomes theoretically possible to investigate the natural world beyond discursive accounts of it, allowing Bouveresse to rescue Wittgenstein from his postmodern followers.²⁵

However, even with this realist reading in place, licensing the rational investigation of nature, Bouveresse understands that one can take Wittgenstein only so far in this direction before meeting an unyielding limit—the explicit vetoes set out in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Bouveresse's response is two-fold. On the one hand, he argues that there is some room for interpretive latitude in Wittgenstein, who, while enjoining philosophers to 'attain clarity', 'did not give very clear guidance on

²⁴ PR, p. 42.

²⁵ PR, pp. 42, 45. In a similar vein, he retorts to Richard Rorty: 'To hold that the objective truth of which realism speaks cannot be a property of our representations simply because these representations will always be by definition our own work, and not that of nature itself, is to hold over realism a victory that is frankly much too easy not to be held suspect': Jacques Bouveresse, 'Reading Rorty: Pragmatism and Its Consequences', in Robert Brandom, ed., *Rorty and His Critics*, Oxford 2000, p. 138.

the nature of the instruments to be used' for the purpose. Besides, he adds, if Wittgenstein was against the acquisition of new knowledge in theory, he behaved differently in practice, researching the latest trends in Gestalt psychology in order to sharpen his own critique of psychologism. Thus, concludes Bouveresse, the goal of philosophy may not be to acquire knowledge, but if it wants to attain clarity, it is 'obliged to stay constantly informed of developments in theoretical knowledge.'²⁶

At the same time, and again with the purpose of reconciliation in mind, Bouveresse favours an 'unheroic' view of science, which only succeeds in knowing the world 'up to a certain point' and does not have 'a "monopoly" on the search for objective knowledge'. He has criticized Paul Valéry—another of his enthusiasms—for thinking science would eventually destroy all metaphysical positions, thus betraying his lack of trust in philosophy's ability to accomplish this in its own way.²⁷ Science is only one form of knowing, and itself by no means infallible; philosophy need not defer to it. By these means Bouveresse aims to defend the values of science—rational inquiry, progressive advance of knowledge—against postmodern relativism, without sacrificing philosophy's autonomy as a discipline, with its own practices and rules of inquiry. Even where these may be analogous to those of science, they are never identical. Nevertheless, he concedes the limits of the reconciliation he wants to effect between the two apparently contradictory conceptions of philosophy: the one activist, in sympathy with science, the other quietist, after the later Wittgenstein. Bouveresse drew attention to this problem in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, in which he explained his project for a chair of both language and epistemology. Having conceded that he had 'given the impression' of endorsing a quietist approach, he added that though 'there is no use denying that these are really two different conceptions of philosophy', 'they can surely coexist, even if they have little chance of understanding one another.'²⁸

Assaults on reason

Le Mythe de l'intériorité was published just as the sea-change that swept the French intellectual scene in the late seventies was gathering

²⁶ PR, 127.

²⁷ Bouveresse, *La Philosophie d'un anti-philosophe: Paul Valéry*, Oxford 1993, p. 12.

²⁸ Bouveresse, *La Demande philosophique: Que veut la philosophie et que peut-on vouloir d'elle? Leçon inaugurale du Collège de France (6 Octobre 1995)*, Paris 2015, p. 69.

momentum: the rise, on the one hand, of the New Philosophers, with their belated discovery of Stalin's gulag and perception of totalitarianism in the least stirring of the left; and on the other hand, of the neo-Nietzscheans, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard. French media attention was lavished on both. Bouveresse had no truck with the former, remarking acidly that the collapse of Marxism, the 'discovery' of human rights and the replacement of theoreticism by moralism had done nothing to change French philosophy's presumption that commitment to a cause dispensed it from the elementary rules of critical discussion.²⁹ But his ire was directed at the second trend. In 1984, back at the University of Paris after a four-year stint at the University of Geneva, he launched a double volley against the thinkers of deconstruction and postmodernism in two short books, *Le Philosophe chez les autophages* ['the philosopher among the cannibals'] and *Rationalité et cynisme*.

There already existed a rich body of critical analysis of the changing character of the French intelligentsia. Bourdieu's investigations of the 'intellectual field' had begun in the sixties, and Debray's landmark *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France*—paying warm tribute to Bourdieu's account, which it far transcended—appeared in 1979.³⁰ Bouveresse avoided direct discussion of either. His chosen approach was 'both more personalized and less concerned with explaining what it judges'.³¹ In retrospect, he would characterize his 1984 interventions as Wittgensteinian philosophical 'therapy', diagnoses of the sickness of French practice.³² His tone at the time was vituperative, accusing Deleuze, Derrida and the others of infantile resentment, aggressive provincialism and terrorist practice in their contempt for philosophical tradition.³³ Methodologically, the two books concentrated exclusively on the logic of their subjects' ideas.

²⁹ Bouveresse, 'Why I am so very unFrench' [1982], in *Why I am so very unFrench, and Other Essays*, Paris 2013, p. 13.

³⁰ For the English edition, Régis Debray, *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France*, London 1981, p. 79. Twenty years later, Bouveresse would describe *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France* as a brave and remarkable book, demonstrating that 'forty mediocrats had the power of life and death over forty thousand authors': Bouveresse, *Bourdieu, savant et politique*, p. 83

³¹ PR, p. 30.

³² PR, p. 121.

³³ Two years earlier, Bouveresse had accused French philosophy as a whole of eclecticism, superficiality, confusion of interests with crazes, puerile predilection for systematic excesses and provocations, profound indifference to reasons and consequences, chauvinism and political megalomania, among other things: 'Why I am so very unFrench', p. 17.

Rationalité et cynisme focused on the glaring faults in deconstructionism's treatment of science—not so much rejecting or ignoring it, as irresponsibly misrepresenting and misusing it. Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* was emblematic of this vice. Central to his 'Report on Knowledge' was the claim that science was—taking the term from Wittgenstein—one 'language game' among others. If it had once been governed by systematic rules and methods of verification, this was now changing Lyotard had argued. By concerning itself with 'such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, *fracta*, catastrophes and pragmatic paradoxes', postmodern science was 'theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, non-rectifiable and paradoxical. It is altering the meaning of the word *knowledge*.' Formerly, Lyotard held, science had rested on a model of consensus in which bold and original claims were ignored or repressed. The new directions of postmodern science allowed for a 'differential' focus: 'A statement is deemed worth retaining the moment it marks a difference from what is already known, and after an argument and proof in support of it has been found. Science is a model of an "open system".'³⁴

Bouveresse devoted fifty pages of *Rationalité et cynisme* to picking apart these claims—not only because he held that Lyotard's arguments were arrogant and unsubstantiated, but also because they inverted his own reading of the later Wittgenstein and his relationship to science. Whereas Bouveresse had striven to present a realist Wittgenstein who, in his practice at least, never questioned science's pursuit of objective truth, Lyotard's Wittgenstein was a conventionalist with a deflated, pragmatist conception of science. He took the philosopher's anti-foundationalist thought in an aesthetic direction, admiring postmodern science for its capacity to generate ideas that were simply new, not necessarily true. This was an outlook, Bouveresse observed, in which 'philosophers have an avant-garde mission to protect and, if needed, sustain the *différend*'—the irreducible difference between language games—'against all attempts at regularization'. But all Lyotard had done was mock as sentimental any discourse requiring some form of communication or agreement, offering in its place a romantic-anarchistic parody of science in tune with his own transgressive commitments. The upshot was 'no more than a poor pastiche of Nietzsche's transvaluation of values'.³⁵

³⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 60, 64.

³⁵ Bouveresse, *Rationalité et cynisme*, Paris 1984, pp. 130, 134.

The condition for these polemics was Bouveresse's own reliance on 'postmodern' themes—myth of interiority, absence of foundations in philosophy—and therefore his need to establish legitimate uses of them. He attacked the deconstructionists' histrionic approach to the question of underlying metaphysical foundations in philosophy—obsessively looking for them and thus 'dramatizing to the extreme their absence'.³⁶ Wittgenstein and others had long ago recognized that philosophy could and should operate without foundations, so why not move on to analysing concepts, rules and judgements? Deconstruction avoided confronting the implications of its own premises.³⁷ *Le Philosophe chez les autophages* dealt more generally with the 'death of philosophy' proclaimed by the postmodernists. Starved of sustenance by its practitioners, Bouveresse questioned how long French philosophy would be able to sustain itself by 'consuming its own flesh'—deconstructing the structures of its discourse.³⁸ In place of a rational discipline they proposed an invitation to creative disorder, like that issued by Oswald Spengler in *Decline of the West*. Against this, philosophy should reclaim the values of the limited and the exact.

Here Bouveresse mobilized the thought of Robert Musil who, in his 1920s critique of Spengler, had targeted the sweepingly romantic-nihilist ideas of the earlier period that Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard were now reinvigorating.³⁹ During the inter-war period, Musil's highly original philosophical conception of history was hammered out in a series of essays, 'snapshots', idea-complexes and conjunctural interventions, both urgent and abstract, complementing the multiple drafts of his modernist epic, *The Man without Qualities*.⁴⁰ Drawing upon a training in mathematics, philosophy, experimental psychology, engineering, and a working life in cultural and political journalism, he grappled with the problems of an unconstituted 'middle zone' between scientific and

³⁶ PR, p. 18.

³⁷ Bouveresse, *Le Philosophe chez les autophages*, Paris 1984, p. 182.

³⁸ Bouveresse, *Le Philosophe chez les autophages*, p. 14. Despite the ferocity of these works, Bouveresse would have no difficulty in working with Derrida on the Commission on Education convened by Bourdieu and François Gros in 1989.

³⁹ See Robert Musil, 'Mind and Experience: Notes for Readers who Have Eluded the Decline of the West', in Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, Burton Pike and David Luft, eds, Chicago 1990; the essay was first published in *Der neue Merkur* in 1921.

⁴⁰ Musil's collected work runs to nine volumes. Many of his essays were published in *Die neue Rundschau*, of which he was an editor in 1914.

artistic thinking. Bouveresse's first public engagement with this body of work appeared in 1978, when he was invited to contribute to an issue of *L'Arc*, the iconographic cultural monthly, devoted to the author. Since then, he has described himself turning to Musil's writings on a 'daily and nightly' basis—he was 'the rare author who seems completely honest'.⁴¹ In a book-length study, *L'Homme probable* (1993), he explored the perspectives cast on current debates around chance and determinism by Musil's work. Although this would be an unusual move for an Anglophone analytic philosopher, it was less surprising in a French context: Sartre had written extensively on Flaubert, the deconstructionists on Poe and Kafka. In the same way, Musil's work became a foundational text for Bouveresse: 'I never re-read *The Man without Qualities* in any doubt that we must begin again right here, down to the very detail, where the author left us—our era 'has not begun to understand the uses this book could have.'⁴² What was the context of Musil's cultural and intellectual project, and what 'uses' has Bouveresse made of him?

Symptoms of the future?

Writing after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, whose culture had formed him, Musil was possessed by the need to grasp the new social reality that was coming into being. His subject was change. He ruthlessly banished any nostalgia for the Old World, while retaining the fullest recollection and understanding of it. Many of those who spoke of the 'new man' really meant the old man, liberated. Musil's astonishingly radical conception of history aimed at something else. At each moment, the world could be transformed in any direction, the narrator of *The Man without Qualities* averred; that was, so to speak, 'in its blood'. Hence the point was to comport oneself not as a 'definite' character, in a 'definite world, where only a few buttons need adjusting', but rather 'as someone born to change, surrounded by a world created for changing, more or less like a drop of water inside a cloud.'⁴³ There were two ways of reacting to elements of disorder within a system: to try to

⁴¹ Bouveresse, 'La science sourit dans sa barbe', *L'Arc* 74, April 1978; republished in *La voix de l'âme et les chemins de l'esprit: Dix études sur Robert Musil*, Paris 2001; PR, p. 29.

⁴² Bouveresse, *L'Homme probable: Robert Musil, le hasard, la moyenne et l'escargot de l'histoire*, Paris 1993, p. 63.

⁴³ Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, vol. 1, London 1997, p. 295 (trans. modified).

neutralize them, or to treat them as possible elements of an altogether different order—symptoms of the future. According to Musil, Thomas Mann had taken the first course: the writers who please their age the most are those who represent it the best, in the sense of providing an improved version of the world-view of the average man, who by the same stroke feels life to be accurately represented there. For Musil, the task of the writer was not to express the common understanding of the age, but to transform it.⁴⁴ In part, the origins of the catastrophe that had overtaken Europe in 1914 lay in the incongruity between its dominant neo-romantic ideology and the realities of European life. Of the enormous literature on the subject, there was ‘hardly a single sensible book that tries to see this problem as a problem, a new problem, and not as an old, failed solution.’⁴⁵

It’s not difficult to see why Bouveresse would be attracted to Musil’s work. First, his remorseless ironizing of neo-romantic ideology provided a range of artillery to deploy against the proponents of over-blown philosophical systems. Both in his essays and in *The Man without Qualities*, Musil assailed then-fashionable ideas about the imminent fall of civilization peddled by, among others, Spengler in *Decline of the West*, attacking the way these prophets brandished the Second Law of Thermodynamics to add pseudo-scientific legitimacy to their notions of racial and cultural decay, and also their political dependence on the figure of the hero for their salvation, the man of great qualities who might lead humankind out of the abyss. All this was grist to the mill of Bouveresse’s demolition of French philosophical pretensions. The grand irony of *Man without Qualities*, written in the 1920s and after but set in pre-1914 Kakania,⁴⁶ turns on the Parallel Campaign, in which Vienna’s belle-époque artists, intellectuals, business leaders and politicians devote themselves to the question of how to express the sublimity of Austria’s cultural and philosophical essence in preparation for the Emperor’s jubilee—seventy years on the throne—which will fall in 1918. . . . Some of the most saturnine humour is directed at the character of Arnheim, the Prussian businessman-bombast modelled on Walter Rathenau, whose metaphysical pronouncements on the decay of civilization seduce the Imperial court. The notion that man ‘makes’ history

⁴⁴ Bouveresse, *L’Homme probable*, pp. 31–3.

⁴⁵ Robert Musil, ‘The German as Symptom’ [1923], in *Precision and Soul*, p. 154.

⁴⁶ The ‘KaKa’ standing for *kaiserlich* and *königlich*, imperial and royal, the twin attributes of the vanished Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

is a constant target, the narrator comparing the ‘moulders of the world’ to the hacks who write for the commercial theatre: ‘The lively scenes they create bore us by their lack of ideas and novelty, but by the same token they lull us into that sleepy state of lowered resistance in which we acquiesce in everything put before us. Seen in this light, history arises out of routine ideas.’⁴⁷

Musil’s own construction was resolutely anti-heroic and non-aristocratic. His conception of history, *Bouveresse* underlined, was founded on an awareness of the often spectacular disproportion between the scales of cause and effect. Concerted attempts, mobilizing huge efforts, often produced minimal results, while insignificant causes could produce entirely incommensurate change.⁴⁸ Musil offered the example of women’s emancipation, a result of the inter-relationship of numerous factors—changes in household activity; declining fertility, itself related to changed economic and living conditions; new legal arrangements; a new concept of love; the First World War, which liberated the mass of women from their deference to masculine ideals—with a decisive role played by tailors, thanks to whom women stepped free of their folded, puffed, frilled and layered masses of nineteenth-century clothing.⁴⁹ His ‘law of insufficient reason’, an ironic twist on Leibniz, held that both in our personal lives and in our public-historic lives, what happens does so for no good or sufficient reason. In these conditions, it was logical to consider the laws of probability, which could suggest the averages, means and tendencies to which events and individuals would conform—the latter without even knowing it. In contrast to Nietzsche’s vaulting heroism, Musil sought to conceptualize the ‘average’ or ‘most probable’ man as the true subject and protagonist of mass society. This was, for *Bouveresse*, ‘a theory of little causes, small changes and modest progress’, with the virtue of deflating pretentious accounts of the place of human beings in the social order, in a pro-scientific, even anti-humanist view of modernity that placed a high value on clarity and precision.⁵⁰ In Musil’s caustic summary: ‘If I want a world-view, then I must view the world—that is, establish the facts. The smallest fact about

⁴⁷ Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, pp. 149, 395.

⁴⁸ *Bouveresse*, *L’Homme probable*, p. 16.

⁴⁹ Musil, ‘Woman Yesterday and Tomorrow’ [1931], *Precision and Soul*, p. 212.

⁵⁰ *Bouveresse*, *L’Homme probable*, pp. 207, 176. Vincent Descombes addresses the theme of the ‘average man’ in *Bouveresse*’s work in ‘Grandeur de l’homme moyen’, *Critique*, no. 567–8, pp. 661–77.

the connection between the soul and the hormone balance gives me more perspectives than an idealistic system.⁵¹

A third area of agreement lay in Musil's critique of the neo-romantic subject, or 'soul', which dovetailed with Bouveresse's attack on the Cartesian 'myth of interiority'. *The Man without Qualities* might be read as extending Wittgenstein's notion of the public nature of thought to other 'interior' attributes and experiences. For Musil these could be seen in different lights, on a spectrum ranging from the individual to the general. As Ulrich, his central protagonist, ruminates: 'One can feel a blow not only as pain but as an affront, which will intensify it intolerably; but one can also take it in a sporting spirit'—as in a boxing match—when it is 'merely an obstacle', which one may barely notice at all, for 'it has been sorted into its place in a larger complex, namely that of combat, as a result of which its nature proves to be dependent on the task that it has to fulfil.'⁵² This was not a denial of the passions—the Ulrich character is 'a passionate man'—but an understanding of them that was radically opposed to the fetishization of soul and feeling by the neo-romantics. Musil's novel subverted the interior focus of Joyce, Proust and Woolf to provide an objective, scientific tableau of the modern. His perspective affirmed the generic, impersonal qualities of mass society. It did not, however, see them as symptoms of decay.

Finally, Bouveresse's work on Musil suggests a parallel between his own position as a self-proclaimed outsider within French philosophy and Musil's thinking on alterity. Few people, the latter wrote in 'The German as Symptom', were untouched by the thought that besides the life they led there might also be another, where actions had meanings, not just causes. The writer's aim was to allow people to find this other approach, which they might then adjust for their own individual cases.⁵³ In *L'Homme probable*, Bouveresse termed this 'thinking otherwise'. For Musil, the aleatory, multi-faceted nature of change signalled a liberation: knowledge of contingency could open the way to resistance and the devising of other modes of living.⁵⁴ This meant we should first of all 'give up being possessive about our experiences', and instead look upon them as something more general—'not turned in upon ourselves

⁵¹ Musil, 'The German as Symptom', p. 155.

⁵² Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, p. 39.

⁵³ Musil, 'The German as Symptom', p. 153.

⁵⁴ Bouveresse, *L'Homme probable*, p. 106.

but upward and outward'.⁵⁵ Ulrich, the man without qualities—without 'personal attributes' might be a closer translation of *Eigenshaften*—represented the actualization of this attempt to live 'experimentally' and 'hypothetically'. At the same time, Musil's radical contingency gave Bouveresse the means to picture a new sociology of knowledge, displacing philosophers from their avant-garde, prophetic role. For 'the median man', Bouveresse imagined 'a median science', available and useful to ordinary people, not the preserve of visionary intellectuals. The benefit of Musil's work was to suggest that another relationship between knowledge and the people was conceivable.

For Bouveresse, then, Musil's work dispensed with lofty abstractions, refuted the 'myth of interiority', emphasized precision and offered principles—modest and logical ones—by which to champion the 'ordinary'. He positioned Musil within an 'Austrian tradition' that ran from Bolzano via Brentano, Wittgenstein, Schlick and Neurath to Popper. In contrast to a German tradition of Kantian idealism and Hegelian 'grand speculative constructions', the Austrian was characterized by a preference for logic, precision, the empirical sciences and step-by-step methodologies. In this sense, Bouveresse argued, it would be difficult to find a thinker 'so typically Austrian and so un-German' as Musil.⁵⁶ Speaking of his own position, Bouveresse has suggested that if he conformed to any 'national' temperament, intellectually, it was 'Kakanian'—that is, Austrian, not French—and was happy to report that a colleague identified him with 'Ulrich'.⁵⁷ But if this sounds too tidy, Bouveresse has also imported more unsettling elements into his thought with Musil's very un-Wittgensteinian concept of another life. While Bouveresse's main emphasis still falls on thinking—rather than living—differently, his work from the 1990s on has become more open to social critique.

The art of critique

Indeed, as French culture and politics consolidated its shift to the right in the nineties, Bouveresse, by dint of staying in the same place, now found himself in closer proximity to the independent-minded left. At the Collège de France, he experienced the influence of his friend and

⁵⁵ Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, p. 396.

⁵⁶ Bouveresse, 'Robert Musil and the Destiny of Europe', *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1993, p. 221; see also PR, p. 104.

⁵⁷ PR, pp. 30–1.

colleague Bourdieu as a form of intellectual liberation that helped him ‘to think better’—‘in other words, to think more freely’. In contrast to Bourdieu, ‘whose deepest political sentiment was a detestation of “moderatism”’, Bouveresse described himself as trying ‘to reconcile radicalism in philosophical—or satirical-philosophical—critique with pragmatism and acceptance of the lesser evil in action’, extending far more indulgence than Bourdieu to centre-left ‘flaccidity’. At the same time, he was more sceptical than Bourdieu that critique of the media or the education system could effect any real social change. Yet if he had been angered in the sixties by the insistence of Althusser’s students that ‘everything is political’, Bouveresse was contemptuous now of the new consensus that ‘nothing is political’, as far as philosophy is concerned—making it incongruous to examine whether class or political interests *could* be in play behind clashing philosophical positions. Obligatory radicalism, the ‘conformism of subversion’, had given way to a ‘conformism of consensual adhesion’.⁵⁸

By the turn of the century, he was publishing in venues of the non-conformist left—books with *Raisons d’Agir* and *Agone*, articles in *Le Monde diplomatique* or the *Agone* review—and summoning a third writer, the great Viennese satirist Karl Kraus, into his Austrian pantheon.⁵⁹ Kraus was not an obvious choice for a thinker who, like Bouveresse, placed the highest value on accuracy and sobriety. His chosen mode, the

⁵⁸ Bouveresse, *Bourdieu, savant et politique*, pp. 10, 14, 51–2. Indulgence of Socialist *mollesse* included signing a public appeal for a vote for Ségolène Royal in 2007. A candidate who better exemplified the corruption of the political-intellectual-media nexus that Bouveresse has elsewhere excoriated would be hard to find; BHL, shirtless for his campaign summit meeting with Royal, was a key adviser. See ‘Le 22 avril, assumer notre responsabilité’, *Libération*, 19 April 2007. Other signatories included Etienne Balibar, Robert Castel, Françoise Héritier, Pierre Macherey, Emmanuel Terray, Loïc Wacquant.

⁵⁹ Bouveresse’s first book on Kraus appeared in a *Raisons d’Agir* series edited by Bourdieu: *Schmock, ou le triomphe du journalisme: La grande bataille de Karl Kraus*, Paris 2001. Fifteen years before he had contributed to a special number of a French Austrianists’ journal on the fiftieth anniversary of the satirist’s death: Bouveresse, ‘C’est la guerre—C’est le journal’, *Austriaca: Karl Kraus (1874–1936)*, no. 22, May 1986. Bourdieu too was a great admirer of Kraus and cited him frequently as a sociological ally in his later political writings. See his ‘The Contemporary Relevance of Karl Kraus’, in *Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action*, London 2008.

blistering polemic, is premised on partisan exaggeration and the use of the first weapons that come to hand. If clarity and precision are called for, a better model for a satirist might be Heine. But Heine's targets were German idealism and Prussian censorship, whereas Kraus's opponent was first and foremost the press. Bouveresse was by no means the first thinker to address the character of the French media and its role in the nation's political and intellectual life after the defeat of 1968—and even more so, after 1989. In addition to the work of Bourdieu and Debray, Serge Halimi's *Nouveaux chiens de garde* (1998) was a scathing report on corporate ownership of the mediasphere and its corrupting effects, as book reviewers praised titles pumped out by their employer's press. It's worth noting, too, the vanguard role of the media after the setback for neoliberal policies in France represented by the popular defeat of Juppé's reforms in 1995; politicians, dependent on the electorate's support, kept a low profile, and it was left to the Atlanticist press, led by *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, to advance the case for 'reform', while at the same time promoting the triumph of liberal humanitarianism across the summits of French thought.

The intimate relationship between intellectuals and newspapers called to mind Kraus's jeremiads against the shrill patriotism of both groups in World War I. Kraus directed his acid wit at the fraudulent writers, corrupt politicians and degraded journalists of pre- and inter-war Vienna, against whom he waged an unrelenting campaign in his journal *Die Fackel*, from the position of a critic 'without preconceptions, who observes things without party spectacles'. Political sympathies were not absent from his writings, but he subordinated these to what he termed his 'public office'.⁶⁰ Such was the programme Bouveresse set for himself in his own commentary on the French press. Here, too, were occasions for the philosopher to discharge a public service, and a model for exposing discrepancies between ideology and event. Like Kraus, Bouveresse argued that 'freedom of the press' was meaningless without an associated commitment to truth and integrity. When words like 'inform' and 'communicate' come to be used intransitively, the question of 'what' and 'why' tends to disappear from view. A press that was a mouthpiece for business or political interests all but guaranteed the distortion of

⁶⁰ Kraus, cit. Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna*, New Haven, CT 1986, p. 37.

information. The end result could only be what Debord would call—as Kraus before him, Bouveresse claimed—the society of the spectacle.⁶¹ In the world of *l'information*, ‘everything, including what is most horrifying and intolerable, becomes an abstraction. There are no longer facts, only pieces of information to absorb.’ The result could only be ‘a process of “de-realization”’.⁶² In different ways, both the dominant French philosophy and the dominant French media worked to undermine the rules and truth-procedures that ought to sustain intellectual life, weakening any public sense of contemporary realities.

Critical beliefs

Over the past decade, publications from Bouveresse’s pen have proliferated, as punctual interventions are re-cycled by Agone in the form of short books, accompanied by a six-volume series of his earlier essays.⁶³ One particular contribution stands out. *Peut-on ne pas croire?* (2007) engages directly with Debray’s argument, in *Critique of Political Reason* (1983) and subsequent work, that, *contra* the rationalists, it is not possible to transcend the profound human need for the sacred, as an organizing principle for society; secular replacements for traditional religion—republican values, the political party—inevitably develop into belief systems with their own priesthoods and holy lore.⁶⁴ Bouveresse argued that, while it was indisputable that we need beliefs, Debray was wrong to say that religion was only one belief system among many.

⁶¹ A concept that Bouveresse and others have claimed for Kraus, even though the term and its explicitly Marxian theoretical derivation belong indisputably to Guy Debord. See Bouveresse, *Satire et prophétie: Les voix de Karl Kraus*, Marseille 2007, pp. 158–67. See also Giorgio Agamben, ‘Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*’, in *Means without Ends*, Minneapolis 2000, pp. 75–6.

⁶² PR, 28.

⁶³ His most recent books are *Nietzsche contre Foucault: Sur la vérité, la connaissance et le pouvoir* (2016) and *Le Mythe moderne du progrès* (2017).

⁶⁴ In *Prodiges et vertiges de l’analogie* (1999), Bouveresse had excoriated Debray, along with Michel Serres and Badiou, for abusing mathematical analogies—in Debray’s case, Gödel’s theorem of incompleteness, deployed in support of his argument that all societies require an external organizing principle, preventing them from ever becoming ‘closed’. For Bouveresse, this was reminiscent of the way in which Musil’s contemporaries had exploited dubious analogies with thermodynamics, picking and choosing morsels of science to lend their theories the appearance of rigour. For comments on Bouveresse’s understanding of metaphor, see Thomas Baldwin, ‘Jacques Bouveresse: Being unFrench, Metaphorically’, *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2007, pp. 321–33.

Religion is sufficiently specific as a form of belief to pose a particular set of problems. The fact that we cannot do without belief in general doesn't mean that we can't grapple with this particular type. Debray's argument that religion is always replaced by something else of a religious nature moved too fast from fact to law: just because things have occurred in a certain way doesn't allow us to conclude that they could never happen differently. The historical fact that the death of religion didn't take place as announced doesn't mean that such a death wouldn't constitute real progress, while among the various secular replacements for what Debray called 'the God function', some are clearly more desirable than others. As for Debray's suggestion that US religiosity had contributed to American self-confidence, and therefore helped God's Own Country to confirm its status as unrivalled superpower—in contrast to 'the friendly leave-taking of history by Europe', as it passed the baton to Washington—does this mean, Bouveresse needed the famously US-sceptic Debray, that American predominance is preferable?

Debray, Bouveresse continued, could shelter behind Durkheim, from whom he gleaned his idea of the sacred. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) had traced the 'consecration' of ideas such as free inquiry or the ideal of progress, which Durkheim claimed it now seemed 'sacrilege' to deny. Debray accepted Durkheim's characterization of all representations and events related to the reproduction of the social tie as 'religious', as well as his division of labour attributing the domain of knowledge to science, and that of life and action to religion. For Durkheim, the true function of religion is to help us live, not to help us know. Along with William James, he argued that a believer can accomplish more: he feels stronger; he rises above human suffering because he rises above his own human condition. On these grounds, Bouveresse drily commented, it would be logical to admire the apparent success of the US, which seems to have accepted knowing less—retaining its traditional, not to say archaic, religiosity—in order to accomplish more. Debray was not wrong to say that the present revival of old gods posed a real problem. But the explanation should be sought in the well-known phenomenon of historical amnesia, which, after the defeat of a once-promising novel form, prefers to resort to 'good old' solutions, as if they hadn't already been tried and found wanting. Religious revival doesn't mean that God is now no longer dead. Rather, it offers a measure of the social abandonment felt by many, especially the least privileged—a measure of all that's lacking in the present state

of things, and of the scale of the social transformation that would be necessary to offer them a legitimate sense of belonging.⁶⁵

Evaluation

How should this large and various body of thought be assessed? Bouveresse's distinctive contribution is to have brought French rationalism into dialogue with early twentieth-century Viennese intellectual culture—philosophy, but also literature and cultural criticism—to produce an oeuvre that, contrary to some of his Parisian critics, cannot be reduced to a mere philosophy of consensus, or a crude importation of Anglo-style 'ordinary-language philosophy'. He has fashioned this singular synthesis, he would say, as a renunciation of the French way of doing philosophy. Yet his work may also be seen as proposing a renewal of it in the unfamiliar idiom of the analytic tradition—trying to outflank French philosophy, in particular the deconstructionists, on many of their key positions. Bouveresse is disarmingly unabashed by the criticism that his work is non-original, typically built upon a scaffolding of quotation, or that many of his moves are derivative: 'It's a problem for the people who ask, but not for me'—'To philosophize in reaction to what other philosophers have said can be a very useful genre; I don't mind if it's classed in a subaltern category.'⁶⁶ Morally, these arguments compel respect. Yet one may still press the question of how he treats these other thinkers.

Two signature terms recur throughout his work. The first is a *campagnard* 'distrust'⁶⁷—not only of what is obscure and elitist, but also of the grand synthesis or magniloquent pronouncement. The second is an almost unqualified 'admiration' for great writers, an attitude that's often seen as particularly French. Both can be handicaps to rigorous, fair-minded assessment. In retrospect, Bouveresse has rolled back his earlier 'distrust' for the outstanding figures of the French philosophical tradition, allowing that Sartre had been an exemplary figure in the generosity with which he championed good causes; even with the deconstructionists in

⁶⁵ Bouveresse, *Peut-on ne pas croire? Sur la vérité, la croyance et la foi*, Marseille 2007, pp. 188–205; see also 'Dieu, la vérité, la foi', *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2007. Debray has not directly responded to these criticisms.

⁶⁶ PR, pp. 85, 87.

⁶⁷ 'Méfiance' appears many times in *Le Philosophe et le réel* (pp. 13, 21, 61, 72, 82, *inter alia*), and also in Bouveresse's memorial address for Bourdieu, which he opens by saying that what bound them closely was their shared 'méfiance' in the face of grand philosophical pronouncements. Bouveresse, *Bourdieu, savant et politique*, p. 25.

the 1980s, it was impossible to deny that ‘something important was happening’, and today there might even be reason to regret the passing of those times.⁶⁸ Admiration can be a greater limitation. To recommend a thinker’s body of work for contemporary purposes entails a responsibility to consider it as a whole, probing its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its socio-political context, and engaging with its strongest critics. In his exchange with Rorty, Bouveresse offered the ideal of a democratic philosophical community, where all citizens equally must offer arguments and be willing to listen to and discuss possible objections.⁶⁹ If the politics of philosophy is a matter of procedure, how far does he uphold these standards with his three Viennese mentors?

Bouveresse has performed the service of introducing Wittgenstein’s work to France, but he has done little to probe its conservatism or mystifications, or attempt a balanced critical response. This has left his own work riven with tensions around the Wittgensteinian notion of philosophy as therapy, merely concerned with the errors of other philosophers, while avoiding any criticism of actually existing ‘common sense’. Following the lead of Wittgenstein’s Anglo-Saxon admirers, Bouveresse has made no systematic attempt to reply to other philosophers’ often devastating criticisms of Wittgenstein—most patently Gellner, but also Popper or David Pole. Typically, it is one sauce for the goose and another for the gander in his treatment of Wittgenstein’s exploratory writings. Thus, Bouveresse offers a forgiving reconstruction of his meanderings on Freud, while crudely misrepresenting Sebastiano Timpanaro’s arguments as a reductive determinism.⁷⁰

While attacking his French colleagues for posing as great minds, Bouveresse ignores the fact that Wittgenstein played the part of genius to perfection, gathering a small cult of star-struck acolytes. Bouveresse passes in silence over Wittgenstein’s often grotesque opinions, laid out in *Culture and Value*. He welcomed the atom bomb ‘for creating the prospect of the end, the destruction of a ghastly evil’. He denied that women should have the right to vote, and apparently, while lecturing at Cambridge, would remain silent until the female auditors left the room.

⁶⁸ Bouveresse and Vincent Descombes, ‘Ce qui reste de la philosophie de Sartre’; Bouveresse, *Bourdieu, savant et politique*, p. 55.

⁶⁹ Bouveresse, ‘Reading Rorty’, p. 140.

⁷⁰ Bouveresse, *Wittgenstein Reads Freud*, Princeton 1996, pp. 3–22. For an alternative view, see Charles Rycroft, ‘Timpanaro and “The Freudian Slip”’, *NLR* 1/118, Nov–Dec 1979.

Politically he was a kind of Holy Fool, with a penchant for highly dubious judgements—and, of course, an ardent supporter of the Emperor in the First World War. His friend Paul Engelmann spoke of ‘his loyalty to all legitimate authority, whether religious or social’, an attitude that was ‘so much second nature to him that revolutionary convictions of whatever kind appeared to him throughout his life simply as “immoral”’.⁷¹ Bouveresse has never asked whether these views could bear any relation to his philosophical work.

Kraus, for his part, demonstrated genuine political courage in his outspoken opposition to the First World War. Yet in the famous woodcut cover of *Die Fackel*, in which a burning brand illuminates the skyline of Vienna, Kraus’s ‘torch’ produces as much smoke as light. In *These Great Times*, his wartime writings, consistently targeted the press—Moriz Benedikt of *Die neue freie Presse*, ‘the man who sits at the cash desk of world history’—not the rulers of Europe, as responsible for the war. He made no attempt to analyse the underlying causes and conditions that pitted the imperial powers, new and old, against each other. Nor does Bouveresse, who demonstrates no historical sense himself—and praises the analytical philosophy tradition for its ahistoricity—attempt to do so. As for politics: while claiming to be apolitical, Kraus openly sympathized with the Austrian Social Democratic Party after 1918, but then in the thirties supported its suppression under the Austro-fascist Dollfuss.⁷² This was not just a case of choosing a lesser evil compared with Nazism, though Kraus used this as a justification for his stance, but of an ardent personal enthusiasm for the leader himself. Bouveresse has mounted a strange and evasive defence of Kraus: his admirers had presumed a commitment to social democracy where perhaps none had existed, and therefore expected too much of him; really, there was no politics for Kraus to betray.⁷³ But if Bouveresse is untroubled by the political implications of Kraus’s actions, should he not at least be disturbed by his mentor’s abandonment of the role of public critic? He has attacked Derrida and others for making weak excuses for Heidegger, but has himself engaged in the same operation with Kraus.

⁷¹ For the remark on women, echoed by many others, see Freeman Dyson, ‘What Can You Really Know?’, *NYRB*, 8 November 2012. On the bomb, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, Oxford 1980, pp. 55–56e.

⁷² Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: The Postwar Crisis and the Rise of the Swastika*, New Haven, CT 1986, pp. 473–91.

⁷³ Bouveresse, *Satire et prophétie*, p. 156.

Musil, like Wittgenstein, volunteered in 1914. Politically, the author of *Confusions of Young Törless* described himself as a ‘conservative anarchist’ before the war. Radicalized in its aftermath, he attempted to create a Writers Council, and also called for the socialization of land and the confiscation of large fortunes. In the early twenties, when he wrote many of his most far-seeing texts, he described Marxism as ‘all in all, half true’ and called himself ‘a political supporter of the proletarian movement’.⁷⁴ He followed developments in Soviet Russia closely, and addressed the famous anti-fascist congress organized by the Comintern in 1935, striking an independent-minded note that went down poorly with the Communists on the platform. In the last years of his life, exiled from the Nazis in Switzerland with his wife, Martha Heiman, a Jewish artist and feminist seven years his senior, Musil described himself as neither a revolutionist nor a stationarist—a position that Bouveresse likes to cite. But it might be asked whether his treatment of Musil effectively neutralizes the disturbing alterity of his thought, as Musil described Mann as doing. Like many great comic writers, Musil had a misanthropic streak, and was by no means a benign devotee of the ‘common man’, as one might think from Bouveresse’s presentation. Nor would Musil have accepted Bouveresse’s characterization of him as typifying an Austrian tradition—Musil compared his own national culture unfavourably to that of Germany.⁷⁵ Bouveresse’s construction of that tradition is decidedly cavalier. Of his logicians, Frege, Reichenbach and Carnap were all Germans, not Austrians. Musil’s dissertation on Mach was written in Berlin, where the German Gestalt psychologists were a significant influence on him, as was Nietzsche. His literary career was made in Germany, where he mostly lived until the Nazis took power. Conversely, Austrian culture of the period was rife with currents that were far from scientific, empirical or logical: the mysticism of Hugo von Hofmannsthal or Hermann Broch, for example. Wittgenstein himself was besotted with Weininger and attracted to Spengler, while the *Tractatus* was nothing if not a large-scale dogmatic system.

These incongruities raise the problem of how Bouveresse deals philosophically with the contradictions between his chosen three. His adaptations of Wittgenstein, Musil and Kraus propose different uses for philosophy, which are not easily reconcilable. Most striking are the discrepancies between a Wittgensteinian quietism and the ironic or satiric

⁷⁴ Musil, ‘The German as Symptom’.

⁷⁵ Musil, ‘Buridan’s Austrian’ [1919], *Precision and Soul*, pp. 99–101.

attitudes borrowed from Musil and Kraus. The therapeutic mission of Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy was to dissolve problems by clearing up the confusions that gave rise to them. Irony and satire, however, aim not to return their audience to what is familiar, but to separate them from it, by estrangement. The first seeks to normalize, the second to disorient. But can philosophy be at once therapeutic and estranging? Can it simultaneously offer release to the individual and arouse indignation in the public? Even within the therapeutic mode, there are tensions between its personal application—Bouveresse has ventured that certain philosophical problems might be solved, 'at least for me'⁷⁶—and a social one, as he argued in *Le Mythe de l'intériorité*, where sorting out philosophical questions necessarily involves other selves. His characteristic response to questions such as this is to propose a Leibnizian reconciliation. But can this ever proceed beyond pious declarations of intent, without bowdlerizing or neutralizing one or other of its elements? Finally, while we are well served by Bouveresse's lucid criticisms of other French philosophers, he never convincingly explains what is intrinsically objectionable in a style of thinking oriented towards the creation of new concepts. How truly critical can a philosophy be that is distrustful in principle of radical innovation—that commits itself in advance to modesty?

In sum: for all his disavowals of it, Bouveresse's work has not departed so far from the national tradition as he thinks. His concerns—absence of foundations; critique of the subject; contingency; how to philosophize; the mediasphere—are distinctly Parisian ones, variously shared with Foucault, Althusser, Derrida, Debray, Bourdieu. His use of authors can be just as partial as that of his peers, taking what he likes from their writing, while ignoring or minimizing the rest. He, too, has proved reluctant to enter into real intellectual debate with positions that threaten his own. At the same time, his is a rich and complex body of thought that demands, and rewards, critical engagement. On all these grounds, then, one might perhaps tease him: 'Why, *malgré tout*, are you so very French?'

⁷⁶ PR, pp. 123–4.