Quentin Skinner

One rare warm evening last summer, down by the river behind St John's, the students and staff of the Cambridge History Faculty were having a bit of a time. They were saying goodbye to Quentin Skinner, who had by then been Regius Professor for twelve years, Professor in the Faculty for twenty-nine years, and teaching history at the University for forty-six.

A short while before he became sixty-seven, he had reminded the University of this overlooked fact, and they, having earmarked no special funds for his retention, replied in a flustered way that the Faculty would surely cough up to keep him in some kind of position. No, he replied, that was no good; he was too expensive and for his salary they could hire two new and much-needed lecturers.

So he was leaving, and going at the knockdown price on which he himself insisted to an exquisite office in a lock keeper's cottage along the Mile End Road, to become Barber Beaumont Professor of the Humanities at Queen Mary, London.

He got a terrific send-off, rare in university life: four valedictions, one by Annabel Brett on having been his doctoral student and his extraordinary gifts as a teacher, another on the most recent Regius incumbents, an adroit and tricky turn by John Morrill, since predecessor contributions to the subject had proved by comparison modest and demure, one by the Director of academic publishing at Cambridge University Press, Richard Fisher, in praise of the two astonishing series of scholarly textbooks, conceived and inaugurated by Skinner in the image of his contextualist conception of intellectual history, under the subdued titles of 'Ideas in Context' and 'Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought'. Not many people know that the stout volumes of the first series have sold hundreds of thousands,

while sales of the now familiar royal blue and bright orange livery of the second have passed one million.

It fell to Gareth Stedman Jones to summarise and praise the Skinnerian *oeuvre*, a grand city of theoretic practice and practical reason, whose architecture, roads, parks and prospects extend far beyond the dozen or so of his books in the city centre, all dominated by the commanding edifice built at its heart and dedicated to the commemoration of Thomas Hobbes.

Its earliest origins lie back at Bedford School where, in 1958 or so, a great history teacher, socialist and ex-Guards officer called John Eyre introduced Skinner to R G Collingwood's *Idea of History* and *An Autobiography*. By the time Skinner took his starred First in 1962 and was instantly appointed Fellow of Christ's and, at twenty-two, the College's Director of Studies, he was able to start the revolution in intellectual history by saying to John Dunn, his comrade-in-arms, "You take Locke and I'll take Hobbes".

The mighty names were hardly taken in vain. Yet the insurgent point was specifically not to join the timeless conversation of the Thinkers, in which Plato disputed directly with Machiavelli on the attributes of the Republic, and Augustine shared with Rousseau some embarrassingly true confessions. Indeed, Skinner's most incendiary early paper was called 'The *Un*importance of the great texts'.

It was given to the Political Studies Association, and so roused his audience from their dogmatic slumbers by contending that their labours were built over a huge hole that a number stalked out in a huff and have been obliged, over the years, to return apologetically and admit that the boy was right all along.

Skinner had been riled by the philistine assumption of such as Sir Lewis Namier that ideas in history were so much 'flapdoodle', and that the right way to treat 'screaming radicals'

and their wild ideals was, as Namier's bagman, Hugh Trevor-Roper brightly said, "to knock 'em on the nose".

These were the late sixties, and political argument was fighting fit in a way unseen for years. Skinner's methodological and Collingwoodian insight was that all political philosophers, including authors of the classics, were not trying to answer timeless questions on eternal exam papers, but to win an urgent victory about matters of life and death immediately around them, by the power of reason if possible, of rhetoric if not. Skinner's lifelong preoccupation has been to return the history of ideas to *history*, which is to say that the great texts, like the lesser ones, belonged to contexts.

In spite of what envious parodists of his method have said, this was not a programme to dissolve text into context, still less to deconstruct text into those forces of which the authors were so wholly unaware that they had no clear sense of what they meant and hadn't said it anyway. Skinner's plain blunt injunction was to assume that his key thinkers meant what they said.

The two philosophers at his elbow in his steady compilation of his captivating method were Wittgenstein and John Austin. Wittgenstein taught that meaning is found in use, and Austin by way of his 'performatives' that in saying things, we are – in his immortal title – *doing* things with words. What were they doing, those thinkers, great and small? Were they persuading, affirming, subverting or revising, when they rehearsed their doctrines to decidedly touchy and unpredictable princes or parliaments, parties or even peoples?

This goes deep. For once you radically historicise author and argument in this way, you hit hard against their sheer incommensurability with contemporary certainties about what really matters. Skinner returns to past ideas in order to bring back to the present disconcerting truths (true, that is, as being part of a factual historical record) about the way, for example, people in the early city-states of the Italian Renaissance thought not about rights

but about what is right, about the common good rather than private pleasure, above all about their duty to maintain the conditions of civic liberty rather than about their licence to do what they liked.

This is not the tired old reactionary bromide saying that the past is a better place. It is an admonition to notice how we cannot use the past as the materials for self-congratulation in the present. Over the years, precisely because an increasingly alien present thrust itself under his nose, Skinner turned his strikingly non-polemical courtesies into moral parables for the day.

One such tale was of the origin of the State itself. With the slogans from the Reagan and Thatcher administrations about "rolling back the state" and "small government" in his face, he found in Hobbes and Milton and James Harrington, writing during the great, lost opportunity of the English Commonwealth, an imagining of the State as the fictional being of the people, "a moral agent" capable of "willing the common good" (the phrases are Skinner's own).

The vindication of historical scholarship is made in this simple summary. The world we have lost speaks to us in its archaic accents. The calls to liberty, equality, and to our common wealth are made by these weird-sounding men, and the past comes hurtling into the present with dizzy force. Thus Skinner brings off the miracle of resurrection all historians strive to perform.

With astonishing rapidity his lessons were learned by the next generation, as the worldwide success of the Cambridge Political Texts bears its abundant witness. There is a gormless tendency given very general credence – as Skinner himself remarks – to suppose that fat books of popular history with bestselling success and television spin-off, admirable enough in their way, are more significant than fundamental scholarship (on which the fat books fatten themselves up in any case). One way of rebutting this idiot utilitarianism is to

point out that Skinner's own work, let alone two textbook series, has been translated into twenty-three languages, including Chinese, Russian, Indonesian and Turkish.

History, that is, is a global subject. In acknowledging this and working to make it so, Skinner teaches by the example of the books, the works and the life that our understanding of the past constitutes our understanding of ourselves, our stupid mistakes and catastrophes, our moral victories and practical success. So it is that he can claim, as he does, that history and philosophy are coterminous, even identical, and reaffirms thereby the canonical idea of the university as custodian of the moral imagination and explorer of the geography of the good society.

In a way which aligns him with the great tradition of his subject as embodied in such monumental and public figures as, say, Hume, T H Green, Max Weber and Raymond Aron, he has carried his ideas out of the library and into the books, for sure, but also (collecting nine honorary doctorates as he went) into the extended proceedings of two dozen institutions, ranging from the mighty Princeton Institute by way of San Domenico and the University of Paris to the Bielefeld Science Prize (*Wissenschaftspreis*) which he was awarded, in the footsteps of Habermas and Ronald Dworkin, last month.

Forty-odd years in Cambridge, therefore, but always on the move, everywhere celebrated but refusing celebrity. It may be that, such recognition being so worldwide, it is remarkable that although he may be envied by the trivial-minded, he has scarcely any enemies. A well-known Marxist reviewed one of his books with foaming disapprobation for its failure to march alongside the proletariat, but was so disarmed by Skinner's painstaking reply (in a private letter) that he wrote back in contrition to describe his interlocutor as a *gentleman*.

This is not to say that Skinner avoids controversy, even though readers of the *London Review* will have seen him recently criticised by another Marxist for his too-great "historical

detachment", a rum charge to level against a scholar. In any case, in an unusually firm and decided objection to the Christian apologetics of an unmistakably important philosopher, Charles Taylor, Skinner wrote with rare pungency, endorsing "the scope and depth of modern unbelief" and concluded flatly that "since there is no God, we shall somehow have to manage on our own". It may be conjectured that one reason he has made so much of Hobbes is that Hobbes was the first non-theistic political philosopher.

If such a stance is unusual in his pages, the life which contains the work – which is what integrity *is* – is suffused with a sense of comedy amounting to what one might have to call a vision, if the damned word were not so poisoned by the fatuities of 'mission statements'.

Skinner's comic masters are doubtless to be found in the canon as well as in the grace and philosophic acumen of a beloved philosopher-wife and two fiercely civic-minded children, one recently in war-torn Afghanistan, the other presently in war-torn Broadcasting House.

But his models of comedy are perhaps most happily found in the works of P G Wodehouse, Michael Frayn, Christopher Ricks and Paul Jennings, and their tearing high spirits, their kindly humour and deadly way with a cliché are as clear a guide as you could find to Skinner's reverent irreverence and absolute egalitarianism.

It is this latter quality which gives rise to the one detail which, he remarks in a baffled way, everybody seems to know about him, and that is that he declined the knighthood which goes with the job. When his university pleaded with him to accept it for the good name of Cambridge, he said, with characteristic hilarity, "But I'm a Republican. I can't do that, my friends would never speak to me again."

Given this little tale, it is less of a surprise to find how readily he has taken to the lock-keeper's cottage and the Mile End Road. "It's a genuinely multicultural university," he

declares, "local and communitarian, whereas the social composition of Cambridge is much as it was when I was an undergraduate."

Queen Mary can expect, from this unRoyalist, patriotic Englishman and world-eminent scholar, plenty more for its library shelves and the enlightenment of the united nations of its students. Skinner's is a life which, without television series or newspaper opinionation, has been and is being lived in the dedicated intensity of his plain-spoken thought and in the broadcast generosity of his giving. His is a name which, in these days, we should peculiarly honour.

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