

SPEAKING UP FOR THE CLERKS

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At the end of his essay “Pragmatism, pluralism, and postmodernism” (1998), Richard Rorty writes: “Many of my fellow philosophers use the term “post-modernist relativism” as if it were a pleonasm, and as if utilitarians, pragmatists, and philosophical pluralists in general had committed a sort of “treason” of the clerks, as Julien Benda puts it.¹ Has Rorty betrayed the clerks? Well, it is complex question, to which I used to answer in the affirmative, and to which I am today only tempted to answer thus. Betraying the clerks is certainly not as bad as featuring in Jorge Luis Borgès’ *Historia universal de la infamia*, and one man’s traitor is another man’s hero. Rorty himself considers that invocation of the ideals of truth, reason, knowledge, objectivity and realism is a best empty and at worst a resurrection of a theological way of thinking. I used to try to *argue* against Rorty in order to attempt to show that he is wrong in that². I have, however, come to believe that it is useless play the game of arguments when what is a stake is a general picture. I shall try to follow Rorty’s advice: when you disagree about a picture, just stop arguing and try only to show another way to deal with things. So I shall only try to describe, and illustrate, in a somewhat edifying manner, the figure of the clerk, Julien Benda, in many ways the anti-Rorty figure *par excellence*.³

Julien Benda (1867-1956) is a writer who, although quite famous in his time, is today largely forgotten, including in his own country⁴. He is mostly known for his 1927 best- seller,

¹ *Philosophy and social Hope*, 1999, Penguin, p. 276

² In my joint book with Rorty, *What’s the Use of Truth?* New York: Columbia University Press and in previous writings, I thought I could produce arguments against his views on truth. But he was right to point out that arguments in this field are not enough. So this essay is, in a way, a recognition of this fact.

³ Unfortunately I have been unable to give this essay to the Editor before Richard Rorty’s death.

⁴ On Benda, see J. Niess, *Julien Benda*, Ann Arbor, U. of Michigan Press, 1956, R. Nichols, *Tradition and the Intellectual: Julien Benda and Political Discourse*, Lawrence, the Regent’s Press of Kansas 1978, L. A. Revha, *Julien Benda, un misanthrope juif dans la France de Maurras*, Paris, Plon 1991, A. Compagnon *Les antimodernes*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006. Revha’s book displays no sympathy for Benda, and is biased by the desire to reduce Benda’s career to his conflict with Judaism. Compagnon’s account is mostly focused on Benda’s relationship with the Nouvelle Revue Française and Jean Paulhan. It is a remarkable analysis of Benda’s trajectory as an “antimodern”, along with Chateaubriand, De Maistre, Péguy, Thibaudet, Maritain, Gracq and Barthes, but in spite of the many similarities between these figures that Compagnon reveals, it is doubtful that Benda would have accepted any connection with them. René Etiemble’s account, in *Mes contrepoisons*, Paris, Gallimard 1974, is much sympathetic.

*La trahison des clercs*⁵, although his work is rich of more than thirty books. In his remarkable autobiography *La jeunesse d'un clerc*⁶, the son of a Parisian Jewish family, he presents himself as the pure product of a French Republican education during the heyday of the third Republic, which was called “la république des professeurs”. At the Lycée Charlemagne, he developed a passion for mathematics, but failed at the entrance examination of Ecole Normale Supérieure and Polytechnics, and was admitted “only” at Ecole Centrale, which he soon disliked because he preferred theoretical matters to engineering.⁷ He resigned from Ecole Centrale, and went up to the Sorbonne study history. At the turn of the century, he became an intimate friend of Charles Péguy, with whom he cooperated to *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, which was at that time one of the main circle of those who were going to be called the “intellectuals” after the Dreyfus affair. For Benda and his generation, the Dreyfus affair was the great moment of their life. as he tells us never the choice between truth and justice on the one hand, and nationalism on the other hand was clearer⁸. Benda’s originality, however, resides in his early defence of an uncompromised rationalism against two idols of his time, which he would attack almost obsessively during his whole career. The first is aestheticism and romanticism in literature, the cult of emotion and feeling in art, which he fustigated under the invocation of the amorphous Babylonian God, *Belphegor*.⁹ The second is the irrationalist philosophy of Bergson, on whom he launched a frontal attack in three polemical books published before the first world war.¹⁰ At the time when Bergson was enjoying an almost universal acclaim, Benda courageously fustigated his irrationalism, his reliance on the mysterious powers of intuition, and his cult of mobility and dynamism against what he took to be a geometrisation of time. Where Bergson defends the “fluidity” and the “passing away” of being, Benda defends the eternity and immutability of concepts and of the values of Reason. At the very moment when most of his contemporaries were fascinated by Nietzsche and Wagner and when nationalism reigned with Maurice Barrès, Benda was defending a neo-

⁵ The book was translated into English in 1928 as *The treason of the Intellectuals*, by Richard Aldington; William Morrow & Company, New York. This translation is unfaithful to the term “clerc”, which can also be translated as “cleric”, and which is consciously used by Benda to designate what he considers as modern equivalent of the Church’s clerics. *Intellectual* is the word which was used during the Dreyfus affair. The fact that Benda does not use this word in French, although he addresses this very class of people, is significant. His model of the clerk is not that of the intellectual in the French sense.

⁶ 1937, rééd as. *La jeunesse d'un clerc*, followed by *Un régulier dans le siècle* and *Exercice d'un enterré vif*, Gallimard, Paris, 1968

⁷ *La jeunesse d'un clerc*, op. cit. p. 83-90

⁸ *La jeunesse d'un clerc*, op. cit. p. 114-127

⁹ *Belphegor, essai sur l'esthétique de la société française*, Paris, Emile Paul 1918

¹⁰ *Le bergsonisme ou une philosophie de la mobilité*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1912, *Une philosophie pathétique*, Paris, *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, 1913; *Sur le succès du bergsonisme*, Paris, Mercure de France, 1914. Péguy replied to Benda in *Note conjointe sur M. Bergson et la philosophie bergsonienne*, 1914

classical conception of art and philosophy, based on a kind of Platonic atemporal contemplation of ideals. One could have expected that these positions would bring him closer to pacifism and internationalism. He did not, however, defend internationalism or pacifism during the First World war. He stayed at the distance both from Jaurès and the Marxists and from Charles Maurras's *Action Française*, to whose themes he sometimes seems to be close when he claims the primacy of spiritual values. Nothing, however, is farther from the activism of *Action Française* and the French right between the two wars than Benda's criticism of the French "clerks" in *La trahison des clercs*.

This book - first published in 1927 in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* by Jean Paulhan, who would become Benda's friend and protector - was one of the best-sellers of the period between the two wars. It is based on a single thesis: the men whose function is to defend the eternal and disinterested values of reason and justice – the "clerks" – have betrayed this function in favour of a celebration of practical interests and of political realism. Benda takes the tone of a district attorney in denouncing his contemporaries' passion for politics, their religion of history, their exaltation of the state against the individual, their defense of order instead of justice, and their rejection of democracy and of spiritual values and ideals. Although he makes it clear that these views have German origins, he French nationalism as well. Among the clerks would have betrayed Benda counts Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, d'Annunzio, Sorel, Bergson, Barrès, Maurras, and a number of his French contemporaries, and opposes, quoting Sainte Beuve "intelligence as a mirror" to "intelligence as a sword". The model of the clerk for Benda is not only that of the philosophers like Aquinas, Spinoza and Malebranche who devote their life to the contemplation of truth, but also the great scientists. Everywhere he proclaims the primacy of theoretical values over practical values, and denounces in passing William James' s pragmatism as an ally to the weakening of pure reason.

Benda's ideas have been interpreted as an advocacy of a complete retirement of the intellectual from politics. But Benda never meant that the intellectuals should find refuge in their ivory tower. On the contrary he meant to attack the political ideas of fascists, marxists as well as conservatives of all sorts and he denounced them jointly as *Realpolitiker*. The clerk, for Benda, as he makes clear in many of his newspapers articles during the nineteen thirties, is not someone who refuses to come back to the cave. On the contrary he is someone who brings the ideal values back within reality. Benda himself participated, with André Gide, to the *Union des intellectuels pour la vérité*. His antifascism before the second war, his lucid denunciation of Hitler, his anti-Munichism, his position about Mussolini's invasion of

Ethiopia, show that he was in many ways a “committed intellectual” and not a purely contemplative mind¹¹.

The originality and complexity of Benda’s political positions can also be appreciated from his book *Discours à la nation européenne*, published just before the war¹². He there commits himself to a true European internationalism which would elevate the European ideal above the nations, and in this respect the book is directly written against French and German nationalisms, but when it comes to the European state, Benda recommends that it should be *nation state*, the state of the European *nation*, and not some federal state on the American model.

Shortly before the war, these ideas, and Benda’s influence at NRF, where he had become a leading columnist, began to provoke a lot of hostility against him. People like Paul Léautaud, Robert Brasillach and Céline hastened to remind him of his semitic origins¹³. As he recalls in his memoirs, Benda, although born a Jew, never attached any importance to it, and was completely irreligious. When the French anti-semites accused his hyper-rationalism of smelling apatrid Jewishness, he reacted by writing his *La jeunesse d’un clerc*, which is an hymn to the Republican ideal of integration. But as soon as the war broke in, the signs of hatred became more concrete. Benda was among the first Jews who were denounced by the Vichy police to the Germans, and he had to flee to southern France in Carcassonne, where he spent the war in semi-clandestinity¹⁴. In Paris his library was destroyed and if he had not been hidden by friends he would probably have been deported.

Although he criticised sharply the Marxists as traitors to the clerk’s ideals, and was himself strongly disliked by them¹⁵, he became, after the war, a “travelling companion” of the communists, and, having distanced himself from NRF and Paulhan, he even praised the Soviet invasion of Hungary and Staline. Benda liked in the communists their ideals, their role in the French resistance, and their internationalism. Many of his critics have blamed this about-face, and they were right. But it is quite ironical that at the very same time Jean Paul Sartre, the post-war priest of “engagement” (*commitment*) of intellectuals, whose theory of

¹¹ His book *Précision* contains most of his pre-war chronicles, many of them are of an astounding lucidity. For instance when he asks himself whether fascism could come to power in France he predicts a “larvate fascism” (quoted by Compagnon, op.cit. p.340)

¹² Paris, Gallimard, 1939

¹³ Céline in *Bagatelles pour un massacre* (Denoel, Paris, 1941) mentions several times Benda as the prototype of the sophisticated Jew. According to Compagnon (op.cit, p. 333), however, Céline had not read Benda. At one point he mentions his “beau langage”, which seems to show that he had at least read some pages.

¹⁴ On this period, see Gérard Malkasian, « Julien Benda sous l’Occupation : la démocratie à l’épreuve », *Revue philosophique*, 2002, 3, 333-353

¹⁵ Paul Nizan, in his famous 1932 pamphlet *Les chiens de garde* (*The Watchdogs*) Paris, Rieder, accuses Benda of being a typical bourgeois idealist.

the necessary involvement of intellectuals in politics was the very one that Benda attacked in the *Trahison des clercs*, was also a travelling companion to the communists. Benda wrote after the war quite a number of essays, and in particular *La France byzantine* (Paris, Gallimard 1946) and *Du style d'idées* (Paris, Gallimard, 1948) which can be considered as updating of his *Belphegor*, and where he denounces tirelessly the “literaturism” of his contemporaries. He also wrote against Sartre and existentialism in *Tradition de l'existentialisme* (Paris, Grasset 1947), and although many of his writings during this period are a bit repetitive, accentuating what Sartre called his “marotte” (*fad*) for the stance of the rationalist against the idols of the tribe¹⁶, he was, during his old age, quite productive. He could die in 1956, satisfied to have stuck to his motto : *Etiam si omnes ego non*.

Although Antoine Compagnon places Benda among the tradition of what he calls the French “anti-moderns”- those writers from Baudelaire to Roland Barthes who have systematically opposed modernism in literature- Benda seems to me to be an heir of the French moralists like La Bruyère, La Rochefoucauld, or Chamfort, whom he praised highly¹⁷, and of a French rationalist tradition, from Voltaire to Ernest Renan and Hyppolite Taine. He often considers himself as a disciple of the classical philosophers, Descartes, Spinoza and Malebranche, and even tried once to write a book *more geometrico*.¹⁸ But he is no philosopher in the professional or technical sense of the term, and he is mostly an autodidact¹⁹. He is rather, to use his own phrase, a writer of ideas, who uses the literary style in order to express thoughts rather than feelings or emotion.²⁰ Ironically, as many have remarked, in spite of his permanent opposition to the emotive part of the mind, Benda’s writing is actually quite passionate, as if reason was his own exclusive passion.

Many of his critics have accused Benda’s conception of reason for being a caricature. Reason, they say, is not a sort of Minerva and Truth is not a goddess whom we have to worship. But although he dramatized the fight of reason against unreason and was mostly an amateur in philosophy, Benda was not a bad philosopher. His criticism of Bergsonism certainly lacks subtlety when he opposes a “static” conception of truth and being to Bergson’s “mobilitist” and “dynamical” view, but should we blame him for having seen quite well that

¹⁶ Sartre *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?* Paris, Gallimard 1948, reed Folio, 1985, p.161

¹⁷ see his preface and edition to La Bruyère *Caractères*, Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pleiade

¹⁸ *Essai d'un discours cohérent sur les rapports de Dieu et du monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1931. This strange book, one of less well known in Benda’s work, is a sort of atheistic imitation of Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

¹⁹ The philosopher of mathematics Jean Cavailles, in one of his letters, calls Benda a “philosophe pour gens du monde” (Gabrièles Ferrières, *Jean Cavailles philosophe et résistant*, Paris, Seuil , p. 52

²⁰ *Du Style d'idées*, Paris, Gallimard 1948.

intuition cannot be a secure criterion of truth ? In many ways, Benda's criticism of intuition resembles Charles Sanders Peirce's criticism of the Cartesian conception of this faculty in his famous paper "On some consequences of four incapacities" (1868) , where Peirce points out that intuition cannot be its own criterion²¹. Benda saw quite well that the Bergsonian *mystique* of mobilism influenced rationalism itself. In his *De quelques constantes de l'esprit humain*, he remarks that the French rationalists themselves had become Bergsonian when they advocated the « plasticity of reason » against the traditional idea that there are immutable canons of rationality. Against relativism, which was making its appearance in French thought with Leon Brunschwig and Gaston Bachelard, he pointed out the paralogism which consists in inferring from the fact that scientific theories change that the norms of rationality themselves change.²² Against dialectical materialism, he was quite right to deny a confusion between contradictions within the human mind and contradiction within reality. In many ways, although he did not know it, his criticism of Heidegger's and Sartre's existentialism was close to Etienne Gilson's in *L'être et l'essence*: why should we believe that that "existence has to take precedence over essence"?²³ Benda saw quite well that the French tradition of so-called rationalism – which one would rather call spiritualism – is in reality no rationalism at all, because it relies more on intuition than on logic and ends up in the celebration of life as a value above any intellectual value. He saw quite well that the so-called French "clarity" actually often masks many obscure demons.

Most of all, Benda was quite lucid in denouncing his contemporaries' conception of literature as "autonomous". Benda saw quite well, from *Belphégor* to *La France byzantine*, that France had developed a cult of *literature for literature*, from Flaubert and Mallarmé to Proust, Valéry and the surrealists²⁴. What is the reign of "pure literature" which Benda was thus denouncing? By this he meant that at one point, the only thing which matters, for a writer, is not the expression of thought and the aim for truth, but only the *style* in itself and for itself. Benda does not say a word about Maurice Blanchot, who was to represent this conception of literature after the war and to influence the next generation. But he saw quite well the seeds of this ideology of literature in Valéry, Paulhan, and Charles du Bos. When Benda tells us that the aim of literature should be truth, he is certainly not advocating a realism like Balzac's or Zola's naturalism. He was opposing the idea, which was to become

²¹ C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. P. Weiss and A. Burks, Harvard University Press, 1932, vol. II.

²² *De quelques constantes de l'esprit humain*, Paris, Gallimard, 1946, p. 127

²³ *Tradition de l'existentialisme*, p.79 ; Etienne Gilson, *l'être et l'essence*, Paris, Vrin 1948.

²⁴ As Antoine Compagnon (op.cit. p. 363 sq.) notes quite well, this was mostly the reason why he broke with Jean Paulhan

immensely fashionable with the structuralists and with the so-called “Theory”, that literature had only to do with *forms*, and not with contents. He intended to promote the view that literature can be a kind of *knowledge*, most of all moral knowledge. In this respect, and in so far as we have now come to recognize the narrowness of this conception, it seems to me not only that we have to acknowledge his lucidity.²⁵

No writer would seem to be farther from Benda than Rorty. Where the first defends the absoluteness of reason and truth, the second is sceptical about both. Where the first defends universalism, the second has been accused of relativism. And most of all, Benda seems to be the anti-pragmatist thinker *par excellence*. As I said above, it is not my intention, here, to enter a confrontation between Benda’s ideas and Rorty’s. But there are at least three main objections that a pragmatist like Rorty could make against Benda.

The first one is that his position on pragmatism seems to be very naïve, and that his conception of the ideals of reason seems to divorce completely the world of ideas from the sensible world, in a way which even Plato would have refused. Benda, like many critics of this pragmatism, simply assimilates it to a form of utilitarianism and to the view that practical interests dominate truth and ideals. Although he sometimes quotes William James and F.C. Schiller, he obviously had never read their works in detail.²⁶ In his lucid review of *La trahison des clercs*, T.S. Eliot wrote:

“He holds up to the artist, to the critic, to the philosopher, an ideal of detachment from passions of class, race, nation and party, which, even though he does not clearly distinguish *passion* from *interest*, is very admirable. But it implies a complete severance of the speculative from the practical which is itself impossible, and leads, in M. Benda's implications, to an isolation which may be itself a romantic excess. ..

...The only moral to be drawn, therefore, is that you cannot lay down any hard and fast rule of what interests the *clerc*, the intellectual, should or should not have. All you can have is a standard of intellect, reason and critical ability which is applicable to the whole of a writer's work. If there is a right relation of emotion to thought in practical affairs, so there is in speculation and art too. A good poem, for instance, is not an outburst of pure feeling, but is the result of a more than common power of controlling and manipulating feelings.”²⁷

²⁵ Roland Barthes himself reject his own early formalism, and defended, in his late work, some themese closer to Benda than to structuralism. see Compagnon, op.cit. Some former structuralists literary critics have recently rediscovered the view, also defended by Lionel Trilling in the US, that literature has something to do with truth. See for instance Tzvetan Todorov, *La littérature en péril*, Paris , Flammarion 2007. But at no point Todorov mentions Benda.

²⁶ John Dewey replied to Benda in “William James' Morals and Julien Benda's”. *Commentary* January 1948.

²⁷ T.S. Eliot, Review of *La trahison des clercs*, *The Classic Review*, December 12, 1928

It seems to me that Eliot is right. The point is not to reach a view for nowhere – that of Sirius, which Benda himself loved so much²⁸ - from which we could free ourselves from all emotions, contemplate the pure ideals of reason and observe their commands, for there is no such view. The point is rather to find a proper balance of passion and reason, and of integration of the one into the other, as another of Benda's contemporaries, whom he probably never read, Robert Musil, saw quite well.²⁹

The second one is: is it right to say, like Benda, are there duties of the intellectual *qua* intellectual? The very thesis of *La trahison des clercs* says so: there are intellectual duties, and duties to the Intellect *in itself*, which we have to obey imperatively. But a pragmatist would say here that it is not obvious that, *as believers or as thinkers*, we incur any such obligation. As a naturalist, Rorty would probably say that it is just a natural fact about us that we have beliefs. That I believe that roses are flowers, and that this belief happens to be true, is a fact, from which no one can derive any specific *duty* to believe this homely truth. Why should there be a specific duty towards truth in general ?³⁰

The third objection is that Benda's conception of the intellectual, if it were followed, would correspond exactly to the sort of attitude of complete detachment from politics and from mundane matters which has been exemplified by the American Academia, especially among philosophers, and even more especially among analytic philosophers. Isn't the analytic philosopher the very model of the clerk in Benda's sense? Haven't analytic philosophers promoted exactly the image of the professional of ideas, who see the economical and political world at a distance from the ivory towers of their campuses?³¹

To these objections, I can imagine Benda retorting, from the bottom of his grave:

“It is right that there are no specific duties and obligations attached to our thinking *as* such g, i.e as a natural process. It is also true that justified belief and knowledge cannot be defined through our obeying certain epistemic obligations and rules. But to embrace the profession of a teacher, a journalist, a writer or a researcher is to accept that there are certain minimal obligations, which are proper to these intellectual professions in virtue of the role that the individuals who embrace these professions play. A teacher has to know his subject, a research

²⁸ see his *Billets de Sirius*, Paris, Le Divan , 1925

²⁹ On this see Jacques Bouveresse, *La Voix de l'âme et les chemins de l'esprit. Dix études sur Robert Musil* Paris, Le Seuil, 2001

³⁰ see W. Alston's arguments against this view, “The deontological conception of justification”, in his *Epistemic Justification*, Cornell, Cornell University Press. On there being no intrinsic duty towards truth, see P. Horwich , “The Value of Truth”,

³¹ Rorty has in many places criticized analytic philosophy in this mood. See e.g.

has to produce knowledge, a journalist has to inquire. It is less clear what function a writer has to fulfil, apart from trying to be a good writer. But in each case there are certain minimal requirements. When I said that the clerks have betrayed their ideals, I did not mean much more than what Proust himself meant when he put the following words in Charlus' mouth: "I have always had a high regard for those who defend grammar or logic. One realises fifty years later that they have warded off great dangers."³² Indeed there are no crimes against logic and truth, and people who make fallacies or mistakes are not going to be jailed. But if those who are, by profession or ideal, supposed to be the incarnation of intellect and reason systematically show their scorn for it and espouse the religion of emotion and feelings, then my claim is that there is sort of crookery.

As for my alleged denial of what William James called, in his *The Will to Believe*, our "passionate nature", I object that I have never ignored the role of passion, including *within* reason. I have always claimed to be a *passionate* rationalist, and that the passion of politics or of history had to be fought by another passion, the passion of reason. But, against James' will to believe doctrine, I have always refused to sacrifice the standards of evidence and of truth of a belief to its alleged utility or practical worth. As someone else, I think, has said, "It is wrong, always, and everywhere, to believe anything on the basis of insufficient evidence". Some³³ have characterised my attitude as a "stubborn cult for truth". But in front of lies, misinformations, and intellectual impostures of all sorts, I prefer always to appear stubborn rather than elegantly ironical.

As for the role of intellectuals in politics, I shall not bore you with my thoughts about Sartre and his followers, including Foucault, Deleuze, and the post structuralists. The issue is not whether intellectuals should be "engagés" or not. The problem is not that of the (admittedly impossible) incarnation of ideals within an ever moving and changing reality, to which the thinker would have to adapt himself. The problem is *without conception of the ideals themselves*. The problem is whether intellectuals have the right, as they proclaim today in France, to *speak bullshit* - as one of your compatriots, Harry Frankfurt, has so nicely put it - and to defend the right to irrationality and to the contempt of truth. If pragmatism implies, as Mr Rorty as said, that truth is an empty word, does it imply that we should believe anything, and, in particular, that we should embrace religion? If we renounce our piety for truth and reason, does that imply that we should embrace others sorts of piety?"

³² Quoted by Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*, Princeton, Princeton university Press, 2002, p.1

³³ Antoine Compagnon, *op.cit.* p.329

I can imagine Richard Rorty shrugging his shoulders at hearing this. But I do not think that he would have completely disagreed.