

Flavio Baroncelli's posthumous collection of short pieces by il melangolo is a splendid exception to standard philosophical literature. It is a slender book (157 pp.) that can be read purely and simply. Indeed, to the extent available to hopeless academically minded professional philosophers like myself, it can be enjoyed as a string of exquisite literary-philosophical vignettes. These short pieces, originally published in various Italian periodicals and newspapers, range from scholarly debates on Plato's role in Western culture to the pride of showing scars and tattoos on one's own body. They are divided in two parts, the former dealing with philosophical themes (15-83) and the latter dealing with ordinary life and socio-political affairs (87-149). Witty and concise, they retain the inventiveness and the curiosity that characterised Baroncelli's life, of which Armando Massarenti, Emilio Mazza, Annalisa Siri and Gürol Sagioglu Baroncelli provide a useful account via the preface (5-8), a short biography (151-3) and an editorial note (155-7).

Some professional philosophers, like the undersigned, may attempt to make some use of Baroncelli's book, e.g. by writing a review of it. However, the review is bound to be fairly unorthodox. What can one say of a book that reads: refreshingly colloquial yet deep; humbly self-deprecating but highly learned; ironically sceptical though warmly humane; both open to the general public and pregnant nonetheless with precious insights for actual academics? Baroncelli's prose, full of abstraction-averse, real-life examples and academic-pomposity-shattering vernacular gems, flows like the prose of his eighteenth-century role-models. Most of all, it recalls Voltaire's prose, whose humour and compassion it evokes when dealing with topics such as tolerance, liberty, dignity, multiculturalism, religion and scientific realism.

Perhaps, the author of this slender book would have preferred to be compared to David Hume, whom Baroncelli admired and studied. Or even to Hume's and the French *philosophes'* much older mentor, i.e. Michel de Montaigne, to whom Baroncelli devotes a delightful sketch (23-6). Still, it is Voltaire the name that springs to mind when Baroncelli combines together, with a few touches of his pen, experience, irony, linguistic analysis, moral wisdom and intellectual acumen.

Professional philosophers may fear such a facility of expression. Clear and pleasant language is often seen as a threat to an argument's poignancy and visibility. Long, tedious, difficult passages abound in philosophical literature. This happens not solely because philosophers are not poets or novelists, though they may be failed ones, but also because philosophers want the full load of reasoning poured into their works to be felt and borne by

the reader. Whenever reasoning seems too unhindered and beautifully rendered, professional philosophers are likely to accuse it of being either “shallow” or “rhetorical”, if not even both. Nonetheless Baroncelli was a professional philosopher, and a good one. His arguments are sound, they stand on solid ground, and they are written so well and humorously – there is enough to become bitterly envious.

Certainly, the same philosophers that treat as “shallow” and “rhetorical” their literarily gifted colleagues are likely to accuse me of being partial. After all, I knew personally Flavio Baroncelli as a teacher, mentor, and friend. That is why I shall invite them to attempt to read simply his latest and, probably, last book. They should follow the advice that he himself gave with regard to Plato, whom one should read “because he is useless” (66). Hopefully, they will appreciate Baroncelli’s gentle and humorous way of being a genuine, unpretentious source of enlightenment.

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