

Old Man Diogenes

Han Ryner

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A few years ago the University of Plantopolis had a professor of foreign literature who was considered unusual. The body of a young giant, formidable and rudimentary; large, irregular, even violent traits; a passionate physiognomy, at times lightened with malice or elevated by lyricism, at other times heavy with a reflective seriousness. Long brown hair, shaggy and standing upright, an abundant and hairy beard that met it; black sparkling eyes, buried deep beneath his bushy brows; and a mouth large as a laugh or eloquence was not the thing about him that surprised most strongly or lastingly.

Dressed in a barely decent fashion he lived, in the working class quarter, in a room that a poor student would have disdained. Not a painting the length of the walls; not an engraving, or even a postcard or photograph. Not a single knickknack anywhere. A narrow steel bed, an immense kitchen table covered with papers which, had they been spread out, would have allowed countless ink stains to be seen; three backless straw chairs. And yet the rare visitors admitted to what the occupant called "Diogenes' barrel" noted certain particular luxuries. They weren't surprised to find at a professor's house many books, some of which were rare. But there was a sign wealth that, in its very banality and bourgeois character was strange: an armoire topped with a mirror spread its solid and flat light. On high, a large writing desk bore, in counsel or ironically, the Socratic motto in the original: know thyself.

The young professor who recommended in Greek to know oneself took, on the corner of a rustic table, common and meager meals. His pots and pans and his table service, most often relegated and tossed into the bottom of the armoire, consisted of a kettle, a ladle, a salt box, a knife, a spoon and a fork. Nary a glass. The young professor only drank water, and he drank this directly from the ladle. He sustained his large body with cheese, cheap cold cuts, and a few vegetables that he boiled with no other seasoning than salt.

This man wasn't a miser. There is nothing more common than a miser in small cities, and this vice surprises no one there. At the end of every month our eccentric distributed almost his entire salary to the poor.

This eccentric wasn't a saint. He never stepped foot in a church, and meeting a priest caused a smile of contempt to cross his lips. Our bizarre personage didn't invest his money anywhere so that it could be returned to him increased a hundred-fold in the other world, not even at the bank of the merciful God.

The bizarre personage was also not what is called a philanthropist. He defended himself from feeling any sentiment, and only ever spoke with disdain of pity: "A low and soft passion, good for women or for other low natures who the indigence of their nature condemns to choose between weak gentleness and cruelty.

Protestants or royalists, socialists or Freemasons, the faithful of all religions declared him mad. Radicals or Catholics, he wasn't judged any more favorably by party members. How many Platanopolitans escape the various herds? These rare independents, of a skeptical spirit, willingly suspend judgment. I think that they suspected the strange professor of being not much less mad than those who proclaimed his madness. But his dementia seemed more interesting, more picturesque to them and, one might say, less stupid. They observed him with a wary and sympathetic curiosity.

Public opinion judges randomly. Would randomness deserve its name if it was always wrong? Here it risked being right.

The young professor in fact manifested a few symptoms of madness. It was perhaps not they that caused him to be accused of dementia.

Of the madman he had the mania for ostentation, the need to explain to all comers and to glorify all his acts. He gladly spoke of nature and the natural life. But his natural had something grandiloquent about it.

His public classes were very popular. It was impossible to deny their abundant, vast, and deep erudition, or their personal views. Often even those most on their guard and hostile applauded loudly, thanks to their noble, lively, and lyrical tone. The eloquent and witty professor was hated and admired. He was all the more hated because one was forced to admire him.

His classes were hardly perfect. Sparkling and tumultuous, or fraught with points that tickled to laughter, they were lacking in grace and flexibility, and they often wounded the sense of measure and balance. They were attacked for their long and unjustified digressions. The old dean, who had taught successive generations official philosophy for forty years said with bitterness, despite his customary indulgence: "The professor of foreign literature is encroaching on my field." Whenever he could, the professor of foreign literature in fact did forget his title and dedicated half of his lessons to the Greek moralists.

The strange professor who caused scandal in so many ways (madness is not, in the university, much less scandalous than talent) was called, according to his official records, Julien Duchène. But he normally signed Lepère-Duchène. Even on official documents he called himself "Julien Duchène, alias Lepère-Duchène." No one knew the reason for this eccentricity, behind which was suspected a temerity that was as revolutionary as it was indecent. In his diatribes against Plato, who he treated as a personal enemy, he opposed Diogenes of Synope to the author of the Laws, "the greatest man of all time and of all countries, if it can be said of a great man that he belongs to a specific time or country." Amused by his admiration for the Cynic and by the Cynicism of his morals, despite his youth his students nicknamed him "Old Man Diogenes."

He knew of this nickname and was proud of it: "May it please whatever it is that will perhaps replace the gods that I some day deserve such glory."

As happens with obvious madmen the opinion people had of him contributed to molding him. As soon as he became Old Man Diogenes for the others, not only did he move ever closer to the ancient Cynics by his conduct and diet, but he began to think of imitating them completely. If no force were to stop him on this slope, it became increasingly probable that he would one day adopt the Cynical life style.

The school vacation, which he passed in the small village of Saint-Julien-en-Beauchène, was one long crisis for him. “One more combat like this one and my victory will be complete.” These internal words meant that he would adopt the Greek cloak, sandals, the heavy rod, the pouch, and the wandering and mendicant life.

A contrary force seemed to manifest itself. At his first public class that year he noted a young girl whose beauty he found to be simple and natural. A blonde, tall, slim, of a supple, almost spiritual grace. The large blue eyes sparkled with intelligence and enthusiasm when the orator pronounced noble words. The lips, of a delicate design and color, opened, honest and sonorous, if he set loose an amusing phrase. She was always the first to understand. Did she not already understand what was going to be said? With a spontaneous movement that showed no hesitation, almost before the end of an amusing or magnificent sentence, she gave the signal for laughter or applause.

From the second time he caught a glimpse of the moving young girl in the audience the young professor spoke only to her. Like so many private madrigals, his mind dedicated to her his universal epigrams of a misanthrope who was amusing himself. It was she who his lyrical outbursts invited on brotherly flights far from men, their lies and their miseries.

For a few days Old man Diogenes contented himself with the vaguest of dreams. And then he felt the need to fix them, make them more precise. He gathered information. The young girl belonged to what the provinces call “an honest family.” The father was triply honored as a retired colonel, an officer of the Legion of Honor, and as chief church warden of his parish. A fortunate encounter, and one of admirable balance, her mother was the daughter of an honorable deceased who, while alive, exercised the honorable profession of republican prefect. She had given her daughter, upon leaving Saint-Denis, all the benefits of what Platanopolis calls “a liberal education.” Lucie played the piano, drew, did watercolors and had a higher diploma. For her own pleasure and improvement, for the past two years she took the other public classes of the faculty of letters. That year, despite Julien Duchène’s bad reputation, she had been allowed to attend, in the company of her overweight mother, the class in foreign literature.

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