

Review

Costica Bradatan, *The Other Bishop Berkeley: An Exercise in Reenchantment*
New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. xii + 227 pp.

Professor Costica Bradatan's new book discusses Berkeley's thought from a more or less neglected point of view. He focuses on Berkeley's alleged Platonism, his two virtually forgotten books *Alciphron* and *Siris*, his affinity to alchemy and alchemical studies, and his famous Bermuda Project. He explains the great traditions of thought behind the Book of Nature and the Great Chain of Being. Both were relevant to Berkeley. Also Berkeley's apologetics in *Alciphron* and elsewhere is discussed. The final chapter is "George Berkeley and Catharism." I would have thought that the good bishop has nothing to do with any of the old European heresies, but Bradatan thinks otherwise. The Cathars were Manichean dualists who condemned matter as something which is not created by God but belongs to Satan. And Berkeley condemned matter to oblivion. The reader of the book may want to decide himself how convincing such an analogy is.

The main idea of the book is that Berkeley's works have been read from a one-sided and artificial point of view. Bradatan wants to "assess Berkeley's works from its roots" (p. 1) rather than from their influence on the later academic and scientific philosophy. This is what is usually done, and Berkeley's heroic new achievements are certainly worth studying. But here his theory of vision, denial of abstractions, discussion of ideas, immaterialism, criticism of natural causality, and his theory of the mind, are all left aside. Of course it is true that Berkeley's thought was deeply rooted to the traditions of his own time. No one can shake off the effects of the historical context. And it is valuable to see what aspects of this context figure in Berkeley's writings. Bradatan works hard to prove his point that the context is much more interesting and significant than it may first seem when we read Berkeley. But then we must read all of Berkeley and not only the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues*.

What we get instead is a genealogy of some other theories of Berkeley, carefully set against the relevant background. First Bradatan reviews the history of Platonism and alchemy and then explains how Berkeley's thought originated from such doctrines. God's archetypes are used to explain individual ideas. *Siris* is said to be an alchemical book because the idea of pine tar as a catholicon or panacea comes from the alchemical lore. Of course Berkeley utilizes ancient philosophy in his later works and he also mentions a seemingly relevant experiment in *Siris*, § 194:

Of this there cannot be a better proof than the experiment of Monsieur Homberg, who made gold of mercury by introducing light into its pores, but at such trouble and expense that I suppose nobody will try the experiment for profit. By this junction of light and mercury both bodies became fixed, and produced a third different from either, to wit, real gold. For the truth of which fact I refer to the Memoirs of the French Academy of Sciences. From the foregoing experiment it appears that gold is

only a mass of mercury penetrated and cemented by the substance of light, the particles of those bodies attracting and fixing each other.

However, Berkeley does not use the word “alchemy” or “alchemist” in his writings, not even in *Siris*. He wants to discuss chemistry. In the quotation above we find a proto-alchemical result. But when we look at it carefully we detect an anomaly. Berkeley says that Homberg “made gold of mercury” by using light. If this is alchemy, mercury turns into gold by the light that enters its pores. One substance changes into another. But Berkeley is too sober minded to say so. Instead he says that gold *is* mercury plus light. Thus gold is a combination of two substances (light is a substance in *Siris*). This is a chemical idea. An alchemist says that mercury and light are turned into gold, that is, mercury and light lose their identity and turn into a new substance, gold. Berkeley does not say so, even if Bradatan refers to Homberg’s “transmuting experiment” here (113).

This leads me to discuss *Siris* and its general significance. Bradatan makes *Siris* look like a full-blown Neoplatonic and alchemical treatise. It is true that its author discusses the ancient authors throughout the text. But it is also true that he quotes them in a very tentative manner so that it is quite difficult to know what doctrines he actually accepts and how he wants to use them. Bradatan is also right that the book reflects the Great Chain of Being and is ultimately apologetic in nature. But it also true that Berkeley develops there his philosophy of science in a detailed and sophisticated manner relying on Newton’s *Optics* and its queries. He knows Newton’s hypotheses. Here he does not hesitate. He thinks that such problems as gravity and its explanation are crucially important in philosophy. He does philosophy of science in *Siris*. Moreover, I cannot quite understand why we should call pine tar and tar water as alchemical substances as they were clearly meant to be medicine for the poor people in Cloyne.

Bradatan discusses Berkeley’s unlucky Bermuda project in terms of utopian studies. I agree that the idea of a college in Bermuda sounds like a utopian dream. But on the other hand, Utopia is a place which does not exist. Bermuda is an existing island. And the Whitehall farm near Newport RI was a home for the whole Berkeley family and their slaves for almost three years. Whitehall was no utopia, even if it was part of the utopia of Bermuda. Of course it is true that Berkeley discussed Bermuda in dream terms, but was it partly because he needed to collect money for his college project? Did he leave London because he did not want to return to Ireland (very few Irishmen do), and his London was an impossibly worldly and sinful place for a religious man and his family to live in? And why did he go to Rhode Island? He says he wanted to grow crops for the college in Bermuda. This is unlikely if we take seriously what Berkeley says about the fantastic abundance of crops in Bermuda. Bradatan describes this very well. Rhode Island soil is not particularly good for farming, unlike the perfect land of his dreams, Bermuda. Actually, Bermuda is quite a barren island. The Whitehall part of the Bermuda project remains an enigma. Why did he sail to Newport with his pregnant wife Anne at the time of the year when the Atlantic was so dangerous to cross? And they almost did not make it. My speculative answer is that he was desperate in London and needed to go somewhere just to show that his grand project was still alive.

When he was in Rhode Island the Dean must have thought also of the recruitment of young Indian students. At the time of his arrival the few surviving local Indians were already living in dismal conditions. The future Master of the College should have sent his violent raiding parties deep inland to capture some future scholars. Bradatan discusses these embarrassing plans openly and frankly.

Professor Costica Bradatan's book contains several well written accounts of the European history of ideas and he relates them to Berkeley's writings in an interesting and challenging manner. I fully agree with him that we need to read and master the whole of Berkeley's corpus and not only some preselected parts of it. Bradatan's Berkeley is an amazingly old-fashioned and traditional thinker. I personally still prefer him as a modernist hero and genius who created so many new and unexpected theories that we still struggle to cope with their details.

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