

tor, “have become so corporate, so bureaucratic, so politically correct—all these things have sucked the life out of them.” The best newspapers of the past, in his view, built reader excitement and loyalty “around personality, columnists who make you feel like you’re part of that world, whatever they’re writing about.” *Salon* has tried to do that with established national names such as Camille Paglia and David Horowitz, along with less known writers such as humorist Cintra Wilson.

“Among the high-end online magazines,” Powers writes, “*Salon* seems to be doing as well as anyone.” The number of “page views” (“visits” by readers to individual pages of the webzine) recently reached three million a

month. *Salon*, according to Talbot, has 75,000 registered readers. It will need a much bigger audience to attract enough advertisers to make it a commercial success, the editors acknowledge.

Powers does not try to predict *Salon*’s financial future. But he doubts that its attempt to recapture a sense of local community can work. The newspapers of yore were physically rooted in the places in which people made their lives. *Salon*, in contrast, serves a “virtual community,” made up of people who like the publication’s ideas, slant, or sensibility. It’s just not the same, Powers maintains. “A newspaper wasn’t a club you wanted to join, it was an expression of a club you were already in.”

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy Adrift

“Trends in Recent American Philosophy” by Alexander Nehamas, in *Daedalus* (Winter 1997), Norton’s Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

American philosophy—which for the last half-century has largely meant “analytical” philosophy—is today in a state of confusion, with no canon, no common ground, and no “clear overall direction,” writes Nehamas, a humanities professor at Princeton University. If it is to revive, he says, it must recover its lost heritage of engagement with the larger world.

In the 1930s, pragmatist John Dewey was the leading American philosopher. For him and his followers, Nehamas notes, “philosophy was essentially a public enterprise,” concerned with “large-scale practical problems.” Then Rudolf Carnap and his fellow logical positivists arrived in flight from Vienna and Berlin, with a much narrower conception of philosophy, one that made it seem more purely “scientific.” Gradually, as these émigré scholars found university positions here, their ideas began to take hold.

Chief among these was the theory that there are only two kinds of meaningful utterances: “analytic statements” (such as “All bachelors are unmarried males”), which are true simply by virtue of their words’ meanings, and “synthetic statements” (such as “Bill Clinton is a married male”), which involve the empirical world. Strictly speaking, this “verifiability” theory maintains, logic, mathematics, and empirical science

are the only meaningful parts of language. Thus summarily ousted from the domain of philosophy was “metaphysics,” and all moral and aesthetic evaluations.

By the late 1940s, Nehamas says, under the influence of Carnap and Willard Quine, a Harvard University philosopher who worked closely with the positivists and shared their austere conception of philosophy’s proper domain, the discipline came to be widely seen as essentially theoretical. Philosophers began to don the white coats of scientists. They now distrusted common sense and ordinary language as lacking in clarity, and they had virtually no interest in the works of the great philosophers of the past, which were flawed in the same way. Philosophy, as they saw it, bore no direct relation to the larger world, and served instead as a handmaiden to other disciplines, providing advice about epistemic reliability. (Some analytical philosophers, influenced by British thinker J. L. Austin [1911–60]), did not share the positivists’ distrust of ordinary language, but rather favored close attention to its complexities and nuances. These philosophers, too, however, regarded their discipline as a “second-order” one.)

But then, Nehamas says, several profoundly unsettling developments occurred. Thomas S. Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific*

Revolutions (1963) “showed that the positivist distinction between the pure data of sensation on the one hand and the conceptual operations of the theoretical understanding on the other could not be maintained.” Science, in other words, was not simply the unfolding of pure reason. The philosopher Wilfrid Sellars similarly attacked the idea of pure sensory data and argued “that philosophy cannot be done completely independently of its own history.” Soon, philosophers began to take some steps back toward engagement with the world: John Rawls’s influential *Theory of Justice* (1970) appeared; “applied

philosophy,” particularly business and medical ethics, emerged; and feminism arrived on the scene. There has even been renewed interest in the thought of the pragmatists.

Still dominated by the analytical approach, American philosophy today, Nehamas says, seems in “a holding pattern, [without] an explicit sense of unity and mission.” To regain that sense, he suggests, philosophers—who now, for the most part, are simply going their own separate ways—must look outward more and try to make their common discipline, once again, a public enterprise.

The Forgotten Renaissance

“The Other Face of the Renaissance” by Jaroslav Pelikan, in *The Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Apr. 1997), Norton’s Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), his famous book about Italian life from the mid-14th to the mid-16th centuries, Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt vividly described the rise of humanism and worship of the classical past as medieval Christendom declined. Under his spell, many later scholars came to see the Renaissance as a sort of prelude to the Enlightenment. “Humanism” was often equated with the rejection of traditional religious beliefs. But this interpretation is misleading, contends Pelikan, a professor of history emeritus at Yale University.

While Burckhardt wrote of “the revival of antiquity,” the truth is, Pelikan notes, that “neither Hellenic nor Latin culture could be confined to their Classical, pagan expressions.” The humanists of the 15th and 16th centuries, he says, devoted their scholarly labors not only to the works of Plato and Homer but to the Bible and the writings of the early church fathers.

For a millennium after the death of Augustine in A.D. 430, “ignorance of Greek had been a chronic disease in the intellectual life of Western Europe,” Pelikan points out. Yet, thanks in part to the conquests of Alexander the Great (356–23 B.C.), Greek had become a world language. Alexandrian Jews had translat-

ed the Old Testament into Greek, and it was not the Hebrew Bible in the original but their “Septuagint translation” (the miraculous work, according to legend, of 70 translators who, working independently, each achieved the same result) that most of the New Testament writers, including Saint Paul, had known. The Greek church fathers had also produced a vast body of literature. With the recovery of Greek during the Renaissance, much of this literature became accessible in the West for the first time.

Though Latin had not been “lost” in the way that Greek was, it had a similar, and even more extensive, “afterlife,” Pelikan says, in the Vulgate (Saint Jerome’s Latin translation of the Bible made at the end of the fourth



A Florentine scholar in his library, circa 1400.