

Personal Emotions -- Walks with John Heilbron Dominique Pestre

I never thought that John could die. He was far too powerful, too strong, too much going forward -- too determined to let himself die. Or else his death could only come at the most canonical age -- and in any case long after mine. He was too powerful in his knowledge, too convinced in his statements, too present and active in the world, not to appear to me condemned to eternity, to eternal existence.

His gaze was incisive, sharp, penetrating behind his myopic glasses -- he stared at you, words were exchanged, the gaze turned away and turned inward, he spoke. Short, effective, sharp, informed sentences, and more often than not, a few words of irony to lighten serious matters, to round out the infinite knowledge that characterized him -- or to mask a form of shyness if things got too personal. We didn't know each other intimately -- it's not certain that John would have easily allowed it -- but we spent a lot of time together debating. And I confess: I was the one who pushed these theoretical debates about our craft, John was obviously less inclined.

Our first meeting took place in Berkeley around 1985 -- and we had our first discussion. Analyzing CERN's 1965 decision to build a proton collider, I insisted on the extraordinary randomness at work in this decision -- on the malleability of the arguments developed by physicists; on the key role of machine theorists in this risky (but also technically challenging) choice; on the chaotic dynamics of the decision -- and he denounced the overly improbable nature of the outcome I was outlining. At this time, he also made a gesture of affection (although the word is certainly too strong), for he saw me, one afternoon as we walked side by side on campus, sad and depressed -- a psychic state that was foreign to him. He told me why life was good here in Berkeley.

I got to know him better through the Summer School he had initiated with Töre Frangsmyr and Giuliano Pancaldi, and which I had joined. I began to see him as something other than a wellspring of science. In Uppsala, at Santa Lucia for example, when Töre trained us to sing -- and we walked through the snow-white city full of light and people. Or in Bologna, with Alison, at the many meals we had with the organizers and visiting professors -- even though, it seemed to me, part of John's head was still working, still writing an article; there was an enduring seriousness about John, an ability to live several lives, to do several things at once. Or at his home in Oxford, showing me around his new library, filled with an infinite number of books, that he'd had specially built and which occupied the entire top floor of the house. Or in Paris, during a summer school, when he asked me, in the second week, if we couldn't ask the restaurant to vary the desserts -- they were too rich, with too much chocolate, he said.

As we all know, he was omniscient when it came to 20th Century physics, especially quantum (and nuclear) physics. He had visited every archive in Europe, identified and read every manuscript and letter exchanged between scientists, read them in every conceivable language and kept everything close at hand thanks to an infinite memory (and index cards).

His profound vision of science (or, more precisely, of the "most fundamental" physics) was one of rationality at work, of reason always progressing and saying what was most likely and right at the time. Admittedly, the knowledge produced by physicists was always limited, and the scientists' little mishaps were easily and greedily reported by him -- but at all times the scientific statements regulated by the group said what was most relevant, most appropriate, most true.

This didn't prevent him from talking about the power games surrounding science, or the highly social nature of institutions. But in this case, he usually did so with detachment and humor, keeping at a distance this otherwise regulated world of science, which he treated with a certain casualness -- a simple matter of interests, of arrangements. And it's thanks to his

writing style -- factual and agile, perfectly documented and impressionistic in nature, serious and gently ironic -- that he managed the links and made the whole thing crystal-clear. He wasn't making a patchwork quilt -- it would be totally ridiculous to say that -- but he was adding successive, relevant layers of information, regularly inserting original anecdotes -- thus bringing to light a complex social and political world, without having to theorize about it. But John is dead. It's hard to believe. But it's a fact, as hard as ebony. But his gaze will remain with us forever, in our memories, our lives, our works.