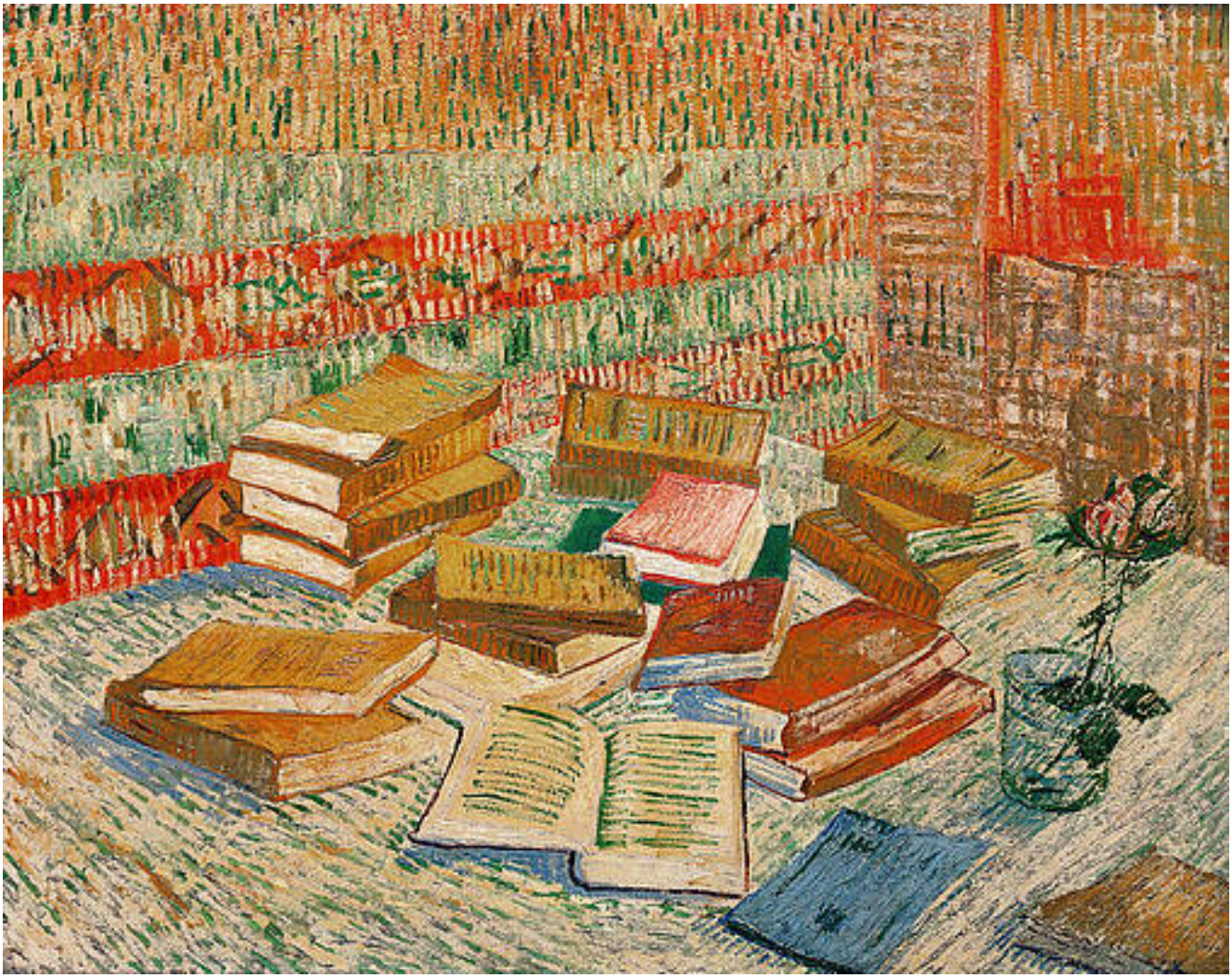
Professor Robert Blanc is Dead

by Pedro Blas González (August 2024)



The Yellow Books (Vincent van Gogh, 1887)

Professor Robert Blanc died a lonely unassuming death.

The Professor's last tranquil moments were spent on his own bed. That summer morning the only witness to his passing was a nurse, hired by him. She was the sole person to hear his final testimony, which was simply: "Mary, don't invent new beings

unless…” He was eighty-three years old and had been a widower for the last 11 years.

When a few close students heard the news later in the day, they assembled outside his department office.

“Dr. Blanc died this morning at home. The way he wanted it,” said Malcolm Jennessey, a graduate student, to the other three students present. Other faculty members were not yet informed. The halls were empty, except for the four students and the department secretary.

“Mrs. Johnston,” asked Malcolm, “who is going to arrange his funeral? I’m pretty sure he has no immediate survivors.”

“I don’t know just yet, Malcolm. I’ll have to look into that.”

“I know that after his wife passed away, he was left with only his unmarried daughter, Frida. But she died in an automobile accident several years ago,” said Malcolm to the others.

“I’m going to inquire and see what I can find out. I’ll get in touch with you later.”

Professor Robert Blanc was buried in St. Ambrose Catholic cemetery, next to his wife and daughter, two days later.

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Malcolm was sitting at his desk writing, when the phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Malcolm,” said the female voice on the other end. “It’s Mrs. Johnston. Can you come to my office? I need to see you. It’s about Professor Blanc.”

“Of course. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Malcolm, this is Mr. Irving. He is an attorney, the executor representing the estate of Dr. Blanc,” said Mrs. Johnston,

introducing the two men.

“I don’t know how well you knew Professor Blanc,” said the attorney. “You may not know what I am about to tell you, Mr. Jennessey, but Dr. Blanc only had a distant relative in southern Germany. Here, before me, I have the professor’s will. I am to inform you that the professor left you all of his books, including those in his department office. Of course, it is up to you to accept them. Mrs. Johnston will arrange to let you into his office. I will arrange to have someone let you into his house. Do you have any questions at this time?”

“No. None that come to mind. This comes as a shock to me.”

“Very well, then. Here’s my card. Call me when you are ready,” he said, shaking Malcolm’s hand.

“Mrs. Johnston, not only am I mourning his death, I am flattered.”

“He had great affection for you. He always said you were the son he never had. Do you want to enter his office now?”

“Sure. I’ll ask Phil to help me later, when he finishes work.”

Malcolm had spent numerous hours in Dr. Blanc’s office, as a doctorate candidate discussing topics of interest to him and the professor. Sitting alone in the professor’s office, he realized that the professor’s books were arranged in a rather curious order.

The books, which totaled over 800, this is what the lawyer said, were arranged not by author, period or subject matter. Instead, they were stacked according to topic. That is, they were ordered in such a way that the main topic of concern of a book would be representative of that particular book. That determined its place in the series. For example, Plato’s dialogues were scattered throughout, not the least, which was

the topic of essence and the immortality of the soul. Aristotle, represented a scattering of concerns, including Being and form, and the subject of books.

“Malcolm,” a voice called, accompanying a simultaneous knock on the door.

“Ah, Philip! I’m glad you came. I guess Mrs. Johnston told you?”

“What a surprise. I’ll help you carry them to your car.”

“Thanks. Before we start, I want to show you something that got my attention. Look at the first book. What is it?”

“Plato’s *Timaeus.*”

“What’s the second one?”

“The *Bible*.”

“And the third?”

“Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.”

“How about the fourth?”

“Let’s see,” Philip said, taking a step closer. “It’s Pythagoras. What are you getting at Malcolm?”

“You’ll figure it out yourself. Keep looking. You see anything significant about the layout of the books?”

“No. Just an accessible, ready-made order. The man was orderly, organized.”

“That’s true. But what order do you see?”

“Ancient thinkers, I guess,” he responded, shrugging his shoulders.

“Notice that beginning with the eleventh book the topic

changes.”

“What’s the topic from one to ten? I can’t see much to question here.”

“One to ten is the question of Being and Nothingness and the origin of the universe. Look closely. These are all books you are familiar with. You see, beginning with number eleven, we find books that deal with subsequent questions. Like … there’s Parmenides’ poem, where the goddess orients the charioteer to the two ways of knowing, truth and opinion. Notice that it is followed by the Platonic dialogues that present Socrates arguing: “know thyself” and “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

“I’m still not following you.”

“Philip, do you remember Dr. Blanc’s eternal quip about the universe being riddled with meaning?”

“Replete with meaning is what he used to say.”

“Right. The mystery of being displays the hierarchy of being, he told me. He said on many occasions that if he could find a logical proof for the existence of God, it would only be icing on the cake.

“Don’t we all want that? Philip asked, responding to the part pertaining to God”

“Yes, but listen to the language. He said that the proof would be icing on the cake. This is peculiar. What do you suppose he had in mind?”

“Malcolm, are you forgetting that the man was a thinker?”

“Not at all. He was an original thinker, an old school independent philosopher. I know that. I clearly remember something he once told me during one of our walks by the river. He mentioned that he had devised a personal, intuitive

scheme that would help him break through to a real understanding of human consciousness. He called it existential symmetry."

"Yes, I remember he mentioned it. But what was it?"

"It has to do with capturing the immediacy of the moment—the lived-experience. He discovered that essence, as described in Plato's forms, the *eidos*, could only be appropriated by differentiated persons, and only on existential terms. That, he argued, is the nature and structure of metaphysics: the union of existential inquietude that becomes assuaged by essence. Only self-reflection can deliver us to that form of understanding. He told me most people sleepwalk through life. He said most people are not aware of what or whom they are, especially when engaged in activity. Sensation drives them away from existential reflection. He believed that is alright as long as we reflect on it later, but even that eludes most people. That's why he admired Velazquez's painting "Las Meninas" so much. He considered that painting a symbol of capturing the immediacy of the moment, the lived-experience. He saw that work of art as an instantaneous slice of life sort of thing."

"How does this relate to the ordering of the books?"

"Not sure, yet. But I know there's something to it. I'm going to re-read his essay: "Time, Intuition and the Daily World." In that essay he attempted to verbalize something he already knew intuitively. A form of tacit knowledge, no doubt. He told me paradox and irony are the operating manual of human existence. He confided in me that in his old age he had grown disillusioned and bored by words."

"Bored by words? That's strange. He was a thinker, a writer."

"He conceived human, existential concerns as originating from within oneself. You see, the problems he concerned himself with reflect the essence of man on existential terms. This is

why he believed he had nothing to teach. He knew that a reality like individual human life could not be understood externally through language or the scientific method. His wife, according to him, could often predict and anticipate his thoughts and behavior. He thought that was not just the result of many years of marriage, but the ability to communicate without words. Though, he thought that only happened on rare occasions, and for a minority of people. He told me he didn't think this sort of reality would continue to be a possibility for people in the future, given that few people are committed or willing to stay together for too long. The transient and hollow way of life in the postmodern world concerned him greatly."

"Wish I could have gotten to know him better, like you."

"Actually, you can. Are you willing to help me out in this process? We only have a couple days before we move the books. I believe Dr. Blanc died a lonely man. I think that he left an unfinished project. Maybe we can do justice to his memory, close the circle, as it were."

"OK. You've sold me on the idea."

They discovered that the books were stacked in three categories.

First category: Being. This was by far the largest category. The second was Time. The third: Death. Because of the nature and scope of the categories, all of the works that Dr. Blanc arranged were placed in any one of the three. A few overlapped. For instance, the professor placed the Neo-Platonists from the Patristic Period: Origen Adamantius, Ammonius Saccas and Plotinus in the section designated for Being. The works of the ancient Greek Pre-Socratics were also placed under, Being.

Curiously, Dr. Blanc placed books about the Spanish Baroque painter Francisco de Zurbaran also in the section on Being.

Works pertaining to the physical sciences were grouped under Time, regardless of their subject matter. This was the case with the works of Paracelsus, Alberto Magnus and Newton.

“Malcolm, take a look at this,” said Philip, holding a copy of *On Dualism* by the Polish writer Stanislaw Witkiewicz. “Check out this quote: ‘…contemplation of oneself and others makes the pitiful inadequacy of mental conceptions only too evident.’ I’ve noticed Professor Blanc rarely underlined entire passages or sentences, only isolated words.”

“I noticed that as well. One of my papers that he corrected has marginal notes that read: ‘Malcolm, this quote is unnecessary.’ My quote was from Book XII of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Instead, he wrote: self-reflection + life = God.”

“Well, that’s simple as it gets.”

“Simple, yes. Though, deceptively simple. Nothing is what it first appears, Phil. How many times did he tell us that? Professor Blanc didn’t like talking much. He found it to be a chore. He believed too many words cloud the mind. He hated committee meetings and superficial social gatherings.”

“What have you found out about access to his home?”

“The lawyer told me I have a week to get the books, if I want them. After that, the house will be passed on to his distant relative. Let me call him. I’ll get the key and we can go there tonight. I’m going to need your help, Philip.”

Dr. Blanc’s house sat on a cul-de-sac. The house was modest. Many walls were lined with cedar bookshelves filled with volumes, old leather-bound, hardcover and commercial trade paperbacks.

“How many do you suppose there are, Philip?” Malcolm asked, staring at the shelves.

“Eight, ten thousand, easily. It’s going to take several days to take them out.”

On one of the shelves flanked by books was a small, dark wood frame that read: “*Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*.”

“Look at that, Occam’s Razor.” Said Malcolm. “I guess he liked William of Occam, the Invincible Doctor. Dr. Blanc was interested in the relationship of particulars and universals. Though, as a Platonist, he attempted to show how particulars belong to the realm of essence. That’s why his idea of existential symmetry seeks to unite the two.’”

“Malcolm, what did Mrs. Johnston say were Dr. Blanc’s last words?”

“She mentioned something about inventing new beings. Yes, it’s Occam’s Razor, all right: ‘Don’t invent new beings unless you have to.’ Don’t you see, Philip, he actually lived believing only in the reality of the self. That’s why he often lectured on subjective idealism.”

“The thing to do is to read all of his underlined quotes in light of this statement. That’s our key to figuring out what the man truly thought and how he ordered his life.”

“He always said that a philosophy is only true, if we can live by it,” added Malcolm.

“‘…What a man is … is always the chief thing to consider.’ Look, Schopenhauer,” said Philip, reading an open book on the night table. “‘…individuality, or lack thereof, is persistently at work during every moment of our life,”” he read on.

“Look at the underlined words: Man, individuality, life,” said Malcolm, pointing at the page.

“Professor Blanc constantly made allusions in his lectures to

the death of man. Remember? He said that the essence of man was no longer recoverable in postmodernity," added Philip.

"Yes. I think he was trying to salvage whatever vitality he could from the self-alienating technological age he lived in. I mean, he was rather alone in the world," responded Malcolm.

"Look over here, Philip," called out Malcolm from the other end of the room.

"What is it?"

"This paper… It isn't a scholarly article. More on the creative side."

"Read it," urged Philip.

"She takes her strides in a calculated manner. The levity of her judgments informs her soul that all is well with the world—part to part and part to whole. The question remains: how best to employ the force of her joy and sorrow," read Malcolm.

"What do you make of it?" asked Philip.

"It's fiction, alright," said Malcolm. "Probably something he wrote for his own amusement."

"Read some more," requested Philip.

"'She manifests her joy knowing the world is an overrated carnival—yet man is a divine being. The sensual world takes the form of jokes and frivolity … aberrations that keep the soul from soaring…"'

"Yes," interrupted Philip. "The theme of carnivals and spectacles was one of his favorite ways of enlivening any conversation. He had a highly developed awareness of the absurd and immoral, always trying to become normalized through

moral/spiritual aberrations."

Malcolm read on: "'Tents and covered wagons reveal her zest for immobility. Her gentle movements suggest her way of standing still. She moves like the flow of the ebbing tide, always an instance too soon. This is her claim to freedom."'

"I'm not sure this all means anything, Malcolm. Just a story."

"A story, yes. It's the story of his dead wife, don't you see. Read on," urged Malcolm.

Philip read on: "'We are a lonely lot, you and I. Trapped in ourselves, we hope to know, to feel the other. You and I, we are much too ethereal, in life and death, to spread our wings to eternity.'''

"You see, Philip, it's about love and the self; the soul's struggle to become manifest in the flesh… in the sensual world."

"I'm not convinced. A story is a story, no matter what, Malcolm, retorted Philip. "I say we concentrate on the ordering of the books."

Impenetrability is the human condition. This sentence was underlined in the first paragraph of an obscure Sufi manuscript on the nature of being.

"Philip, I'm convinced this means something. I think he was attempting to communicate something to whoever found his books and papers."

"If you take that line of thinking, that would be you. The lawyer did say Dr. Blanc left you his books and papers."

"I think we should contact his nurse. She can probably tell us more," said Malcolm.

Mrs. Mary Wellington, R.N. rang the doorbell of Dr. Blanc's house an hour and a half later.

"Please come in. I am Malcolm. This is my friend Philip. Thank you for coming. As I mentioned over the telephone, I have been left Dr. Blanc's books and scholarly papers. We are curious to know if you can tell us something that will put some of his final thoughts in perspective."

"I can only stay a short while. I feel truly sad returning to this house. I became very attached to him over the last year of his life. He was quite a remarkable man, you know."

"We'll keep you just a few minutes," said Malcolm.

"He mentioned you often, Malcolm. He said he was like you, full of curiosity, when he was your age," said Mrs. Wellington. "You remind him of his youth."

"What else did he say?" asked Malcolm.

"I am not familiar with his work, but he constantly told me that man is like a phantom that suffers because he can't be seen. He said that if we are lucky, we find true love, but love eludes most people."

"What about his books? Did he say why he wanted Malcolm to have them? Asked Philip.

"Yes, that's stated in his will. He told me Malcolm would appreciate and nourish them. He said a man's reading habits is the road map of his life."

"Did he say anything about the incomplete story he left on his night table? Asked Malcolm.

"That's a recent story he dictated to me. You will notice the story is not in his handwriting. It is about his wife and the

love they shared. He told me there are many more stories in the notebooks he kept around the house."

"Did he explain what the story means? Insisted Philip.

"All I know is that she is a disembodied soul that attempts to communicate with him. She's a joyful soul that wants to reach out to him and tell him about immortality; somehow, she is not allowed. I asked him if he truly believed that. He responded by saying that love is stronger than death."

The nurse went on, "He said that life is like a riddle that can only be figured out by old men who visit the circus."

"Anything else you can tell us?" asked Malcolm.

"I was with him for almost a year, you know. In that time, I got to know him pretty well … I think. I know he was very fond of you, Malcolm. He said he was entrusting you with his soul. He didn't say more than that. He said that with enough time and worldly experience, you would come to know him better through his books. He told me that after his wife and daughter died, he needed a witness to his life. Well, I'm sorry," the nurse broke off, "we'll have to meet again some other time. I need to pick up my daughter from school."

The two men continued to sift through Dr. Blanc's books and papers.

At the end of the sequence of books on the lower three levels of one of the bookshelves, they came upon books on the history of the circus, carnivals, Greek and Roman comedies, puzzles, riddles and games. The last book was *Innocence: The Riddle of Existence is Encountered in the Laughter of Children* by a F.H. Lewiston.

Inside this book they found five type-written pages that read: "Perfection is attained by those who, with consistent

unceasing will, seek the only thing worth searching for: joyful wisdom. Wisdom and genuine understanding of the rational and spiritual relations that adhere among things and people are only uncovered through the immediate apprehension of reality. That is an art learned from much self-reflection and observation. Experience counts for almost nothing, if the latter two conditions are not met. Momentary, immediate reflection is the only vehicle suited to grasp the genuine salvation of our being…" Malcolm stopped reading.

"Malcolm, what do you make of it? Asked Philip.

"Private stuff. I don't think any of this is in his published works. Though, he did lecture about these topics. He often spoke with me about these concerns of his," said Malcolm.

As they read on, they came to a postscript in the form of a letter. It read:

> *Dear Malcolm,*
>
> *Now that I have come to the end of my earthy existence, perhaps you will understand that human beings are a universe of often incommunicable complexities and contradictions. Paradoxes and irony abound in human existence. How can we record the lived-experience and make it become the archive of our life?*
>
> *Be wary of words. Joyful wisdom dictates that this be so. We cannot in good conscience ever expect to be understood, much less truly known.*
>
> *I am entrusting you with my soul in the hope that, when you have become an old man, you will come to realize that in our not being known, some men take comfort in the mystery of being, which is the cradle of truth.*
>
> *What is the point of human existence, if not the attainment*

of wisdom? That thought, I am certain, will come to be the guiding principle of your life.

God bless,

Robert Blanc

Table of Contents

Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy in Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included *Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*, *Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*, *Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy* and *Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*. He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofia" (1951) in *Philosophy Today* Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is *Philosophical Perspective on Cinema*.

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