

Georges Canguilhem, 1904–1995

Georges Canguilhem, who died on 11 September 1995 at the age of ninety-one, was France's pre-eminent historian and philosopher of the sciences. A figure of immense authority and prestige, he was regarded with great affection by his many disciples.

Born into a very modest family living in the south-west, Canguilhem was a product of the secular educational system established by the Third Republic. A scholarship took the son of a tailor to the Lycée Henri IV; most of his childhood friends remained on the land. In 1924, Canguilhem entered the *École Normale Supérieure*, one of a glittering cohort that also included Sartre, Nizan, Daniel Lagache and Raymond Aron. Successfully taking the *agrégation de philosophie*, he then taught in schools, quickly acquiring a reputation as a ferocious examiner and as a teacher who did not suffer fools gladly. Unusually, he subsequently studied medicine and qualified as a doctor in 1943.

Canguilhem's postwar career was one of great distinction. In 1948 he became an education inspector with responsibility for philosophy and instilled a reign of terror in the belief that, as Althusser put it, he could correct the philosophical understanding of teachers by bawling them out. In 1955 he succeeded Gaston Bachelard as Professor of the History and Philosophy of the Sciences at the Sorbonne and as Director of the Institut d'Histoire des Sciences et des Techniques. He held both positions until he began a very active retirement in 1971.

Canguilhem's history of the sciences is, like that of Bachelard, largely a history of discontinuities and epistemological breaks, but it is also a critical history in Nietzsche's sense of the term, calling concepts to account for themselves before the court of scientific epistemology. Above all, it is an anti-empiricist history of concepts, dedicated to exploring the shifts that structure or remake fields of knowledge as concepts of normality and pathology emerge, or as fever is defined as a scientific object. Drawing on both his philosophical and medical training, Canguilhem wrote mainly on the life sciences and medicine, producing significant studies of figures such as Darwin, Comte and Claude Bernard.

As Foucault once remarked, it is almost impossible to understand the philosophical developments of the 1960s without making reference to Canguilhem's history of concepts. Canguilhem himself was no Marxist, but was somewhat amused to see the notion of

epistemological breaks being applied to Marxism. His work on ideology and rationality inspired much of the work on scientific ideologies elaborated by the younger members of Althusser's circle, whilst his violent attacks on psychology were exploited by the so-called Lacano-Maoists of *Cahiers pour l'analyse* as they promoted the supposed scientificity of psychoanalysis.

Canguilhem has left no 'complete works'; the six books and innumerable articles he wrote were, in his own view, simply the traces he left as he pursued his 'trade' of teaching philosophy. His work is marked by a certain philosophical style, combining modesty and patience with a deep conviction of the moral seriousness of philosophical work. Although Canguilhem was one of the major inspirations behind the theoretical anti-humanism, his own work is marked by a profound humanism. Knowledge, he argued, was the daughter of fear, but it was a tool that could dominate and organize human existence. Knowledge was a vital element in the freedom of life.

The same seriousness appears in Canguilhem's politics. A staunch pacifist in his youth, Canguilhem was an exemplary representative of a certain republicanism and was greatly influenced by Alain, his teacher at Henri IV. After the fall of France, he resigned his teaching post, remarking with proud contempt that he had not taken the *agrégation de philosophie* in order to teach the Vichy regime's insipid morality of 'Labour, Family, Fatherland'. Like his friend Jean Cavallès, the logician and mathematician who was shot by the Gestapo in 1944, Canguilhem became an active member of the Resistance, working under the *nom de guerre* 'Lafont'. In 1944, he organized a field hospital for resistance fighters in the mountains of the Auvergne and then evacuated it under fire. For this, he was awarded both the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Résistance.

Canguilhem was famed for his sardonic humour and his violent temper, though his rages were usually directed against his colleagues rather than his students. Yet the brusqueness and ill temper went hand in hand with great intellectual generosity and a genuine kindness. The simple hospitality and courtesy he showed an English biographer of Foucault is not easily forgotten.

David Macey

David Macey's review of Canguilhem's *Selected Writings* appears on p. 52, above.