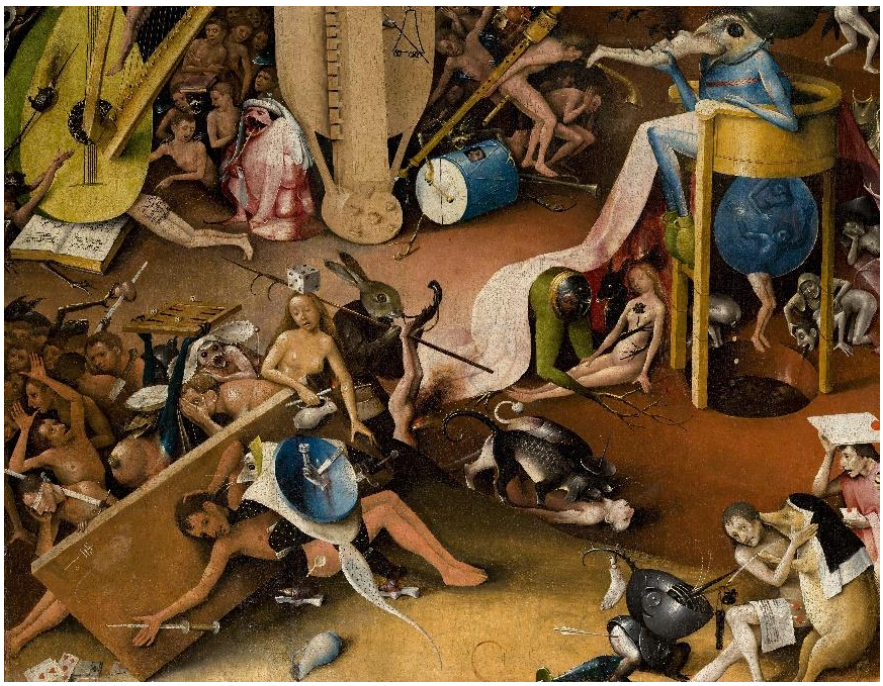
THINGS IN GENERAL



A Literary Miscellany

Brian Coman

This edition printed and bound by the author in Bendigo, Victoria.

Frontispiece: Detail from *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch.
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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

As the title of this essay collection suggests, the subjects treated are so varied as to prevent the use of a more descriptive title. Many of the included essays (or versions of them) have previously appeared in *Quadrant*. Included in the selection are two semi-fictional short stories and some satirical sketches.

A previous collection of essays by the author was published by Connor Court in 2007, under the title *A Loose Canon*.

This book represents the culmination of a long project whose final aim was the entire 'in house' production of a book by the author—from literary composition, through editing and printing, to binding of the pages in the traditional manner. The book has been inkjet-printed on quality paper and the main typeface is in Bembo. The hand-marbled endpapers were produced by the author and the set for each book has its own unique design.

Versions of the following essays were previously published in *Quadrant*: The Mouth of Hell (May 2013); Petrarch and the Mountain (Dec 2006); Why Philosophy Buries its Undertakers (Oct 2009), One Word of Truth (Sept 2008); The Priest and the Jester (Feb 2011); Smelling a Rat, (April 2015); Reynard in the Antipodes (Feb 1997); Birdlore (March 2015); The Noble Savage (March, 2003); The Achievements of Francis Ratcliffe (Jan 1998); Pure Finders and the Broad-toothed Rat (April 1999); The Enduring Problem of Monkey Business (Jan 2014); Reidy's Harvest (Sept 2014).

Brian Coman, April, 2021

THE MOUTH OF HELL

On the Interpretation and Transmission of an Idea

Why read the classics? The typical answer to that question is almost always couched in terms of 'enlarging the mind'. So, for instance, when John Henry Newman, in his *Idea of a University*, argues for the importance of the liberal arts, he has no practical, utilitarian motive in his sights. Rather, such an enterprise seeks to enhance

> the force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us, which sometimes indeed is a natural gift, but commonly is not gained without much effort and the exercise of years.[1]

But how, exactly, does this work? How might reading Homer's *Odyssey*, for instance, enlarge the mind? One answer, at least, concerns the way in which a certain idea resonates in the reader's mind and leads to some extension or elaboration such that the original idea becomes, as it were, a seed bed wherein new growth occurs. But in each mind, the idea is elaborated in different ways, dependent, we might suppose, upon the particular background and experiences of that receiving mind and its powers of imagination. And these new growths, if we may call them that, do expand the mind, taking it into new, unexplored territory. At the same time, they heighten our appreciation when we again come upon our original, received idea, for now we see its immense procreative force. And so, in proposing this process, I am not at all suggesting some sort of evolution of poetic power, for the power has always been latent in the original idea. Indeed, many would say that the poetry of Homer has never been surpassed. Thus, the imagined 'evolution' may well be a process of recovery, and not of expansion, for we are always confronted with problems of translation and of the meaning of words.

I propose, in this essay, to take one such idea (actually a compound of ideas) and to see how it has worked upon the imagination of poets and, by inference, their readers, over the course of two and a half millennia. I have chosen that scene, at the end of Book 10 and the beginning of Book 11, in the *Odyssey*, where the entrance to the Underworld is described, first by Circe, then by Odysseus himself. I could have chosen a dozen others—the Lotus Eaters, Scylla

[1] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Electronic Edition), Bieber Publishing, n.d., Preface.

and Charybdis, the Sirens, the Cyclopes, and so on. Each of these, like a small crystal suspended in a supersaturated solution, has that property of growing itself in the medium of the human imagination, to reflect meaning from a thousand facets.

And so, here is Circe, giving directions:

> Set up your mast, spread the white sail and sit down in the ship. The North wind will blow her on her way; and when she has brought you across the river of Ocean, you will come to a wild coast and Persephone's Grove, where the tall poplars grow, and the willows that so quickly shed their seeds. Beach your boat there by Ocean's swirling streams and go on into Hades Kingdom of Decay. There, at a rocky pinnacle, the River of Flaming Fire and the River of Lamentation, which is a branch of the waters of the Styx, meet and pour their thundering streams into Acheron. [2]

Now, Odysseus takes up the description of the place:

> So she [the ship] reached the furthest parts of the deep-flowing River of Ocean where the Cimmerians live, wrapped in mist and fog. The bright Sun cannot look down on them with his rays, either when he climbs the starry heavens or when he turns back from heaven to earth again. Dreadful night spreads her mantle over that unhappy people.

In this description, we have not yet reached the Underworld, but stand at the threshold. The physical features that Homer gives us are these: the place is wooded and perpetually dark by virtue of impenetrable mists and fogs and has, running through it, ominously named rivers. The Cimmerians who live at its fringe—presumably not part of the populace of the Underworld—are "unhappy people". We know, too, from a short description later, that it is a place which inspires fear and dread in any living mortal that happens upon it. That is the extent of the description given us by Homer. The first passage gives us some general geography, but the second sets the atmosphere of the place. It is, to be sure, not quite the imagined Christian vision of the portal of Hell that we see in later poets but, nonetheless, a frightful place of despair and anguish, from which no ordinary mortal could return.

Upon first inspection, the description we have is meagre enough and we would be justified in thinking that it serves no more than to provide a sort of backdrop for the action. And yet, down through the succeeding centuries it has played upon the human imagination in extraordinary ways, infusing a vast body of literature and holding a powerful spell over us. The prodigious feat of Homer

[2] Here, I use the prose translation by E.V. Rieu, Penguin Classics, where the emphasis is on description, not form—the demands of metre can sometimes obscure the vision!

was to give to the world not only a work of unsurpassed beauty in itself, but a sort of brood-chamber for the human imagination. Let us now look at some of those developments.

Virgil's debt to Homer is so obvious as to preclude any further comment, but what raises him from being a mere plagiarist to a literary genius is precisely his ability to take an idea from Homer and allow it to grow in his imagination. For Virgil, the approach to the Underworld in the *Aeneid* is thickly forested. The Sibyl begins the description in Book VI:

> The way downward is easy from Avernus,
> Black Dis's door stands open night and day,
> But to retrace your step to heaven's air,
> There is trouble, there is toil …
>
> … All midway
> Are forests, then Cocytus, thick and black,
> Winds through the gloom …[3]

Later, the narrator takes up the description of the mouth to the Underworld:

> The cavern was profound, wide-mouthed and huge,
> Rough underfoot, defended by dark pool
> And gloomy forest. Overhead flying things
> Could never safely take their way, such deathly
> Exhalations rose from the black gorge
> Into the dome of heaven …

The first thing to note here is how Virgil achieves his general atmosphere of darkness. Whereas Homer uses mists and fogs, Virgil uses trees. This heightens the effect—one which Dr Johnson, in an unrelated instance, was to call "inspissated gloom". Mists and fogs, in our human experience, are ephemeral things, eventually burned away by the sun's rays. A gloomy forest, on the other hand, persists. Trees feature prominently in the *Aeneid* and Virgil is a master at using them to conjure up an atmosphere. Here is the scene in the forecourt of Hell:

> In the courtyard, a shadowy, giant elm
> Spreads ancient boughs, her ancient arms where dreams,
> False dreams, the old tale goes, beneath each leaf
> Cling and are numberless …

Later in this essay, I will return to that particular description and make what is perhaps a rather large and unsubstantiated claim of its influence on a much later poet.

[3] I use the Fitzgerald translation from Penguin Classics.

Let us now move on some thirteen centuries to Dante and his depiction of the entrance to the Underworld in the *Inferno*. Here, of course, there is no need for us to tease out the relationship between Dante and Virgil, for in the *Inferno* "the gracious Mantuan" is his guide on the journey. Even so, Dante profoundly changes the Virgilian image of the Underworld. We are now in the Christian era, and all that we experience in the *Inferno* is reflected through the lens of Christian theology. The very opening in Canto 1 signals this change:

> Midway in our life's journey, I went astray
> From the straight road and woke to find myself
> alone in a dark wood. How shall I say
> what wood that was, I never saw so drear,
> so rank, so arduous a wilderness!
> Its very memory gives a shape to fear.[4]

The landscape at Hell's mouth is now primarily a moral landscape. The dark forests are forests of sin, the rivers pouring into Acheron, here the boundary of Hell, places of torment and punishment. The mode of punishment for each soul is a reflection of the nature of its earthly transgressions. Dante reserves the vestibule of Hell for those souls who are neither good nor bad, and are, for this very reason, especially loathsome and pathetic. Obviously, they cannot enter Heaven but neither are they fit for Hell itself because the inhabitants there, seeing them, might "glory over them" and therefore, gain some pleasure. The Styx is a marsh where anger is punished, Phlegethon a river of blood punishing those guilty of violence against others, and Cocytus a frozen lake holding fast the hard and frozen hearts of traitors.

Here we see new elements arising, an important one being the changed nature of the four rivers. There is evidence to suppose that this change, in its turn, was to influence other poets. Let me adduce just one example from the Border Ballads, this probably dating from roughly the same era as Dante. Here is Thomas the Rhymer, fallen under the spell of the Elfin Queen and taken away to a shadow world for seven years: It is neither heaven nor hell, but a sort of third alternative—a parallel but dangerous world somewhere:

> O they rade on, and farther on—
> The steed gaed swifter than the wind—
> Untill they reached a desart wide,
> And living land was left behind.
> …

[4] Ciardi translation, Mentor Classics.

O they rade on, and farther on,
And they waded thro rivers aboon the knee,
And they saw neither sun nor moon,
But they heard the roaring of the sea.

It was mirk mirk night, and there was nae stern light,
And they waded thro red blude to the knee;
For a' the blude that's shed on earth
Rins thro' the springs o that countrie.

Many of the elements of Homer's *nekyia* are here—the desolate landscape, the pervasive darkness, the River of Ocean somewhere at hand—but now, the vision of Phlegethon is akin to Dante's, not Homer's. And we note how the punishment of violence in Dante is brought to an even higher pitch here: "For a' the blude that's shed on earth/Rins thro' the springs o that countrie." The vision now carries another new element—the epiphytic nature of the 'faerie', which is wholly dependent upon human suffering. Here too, we can see a remnant of those wraiths in Homer's Underworld hovering about the trench of blood. It is a long way from here to those effete fairies of the Victorian age, whose gossamer wings and tinsel wands are merely pre-school entertainment. Once the Christian religion had been driven out of post-Enlightenment society, so too was the true nature of the faerie lost, for in some strange way, the latter depended on the former. And the loss was palpable—Kingsley's *Water Babies* could not palliate *The City of Dreadful Night*.

Of course, it is entirely possible that the ideas in *Thomas the Rhymer* developed independently and owe nothing to Homer, Virgil or Dante. In biology, the development of similar ranges of species on isolated continents or islands is a matter of common observation and we might expect a similar phenomenon in the development of human ideas in widely separated human cultures. Whatever the case, the particular depiction of the faerie in *Thomas the Rhymer* and similar ballads has certainly influenced later poets. The most famous example is Keats' *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. There again, a whole book could be written about the strange depiction of the faerie in *Thomas the Rhymer*, about the equally strange prohibition of human speech in faerie territory (compare Odysseus who is told to speak only with Tiresias), and many other novel ideas which seem to be an amalgam of Christian and earlier pagan beliefs.

For my next example, I have chosen Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, published at the end of the 16th Century. Like Dante, the influence of both Homer and Virgil is evident in his work, as is the influence of Arthurian legend.

There are many references to the Underworld in Spenser. In Canto 5 of the first Book, for instance, we get images of hell that clearly draw on both Virgil and Homer, but I would like to go back to Canto 1, when the "Gentle Knight" and the "louely Ladie" are forced to take cover from a storm and enter a dark wood. If no direct portal to Black Dis, this wood is, at least, home to a nasty dragon—a very peculiar, Catholic dragon, which spews out religious tracts rather than fire! Here is the description of the "dark woods":

> Whose loftie trees yclad with sommers pride,
> Did spred so broad, that heauens light did hide,
> Not perceable with power of any starre:
>
> Canto I, Verse 7.

This is Virgil's gloomy forest, now acting as an impenetrable barrier to all light. If further proof were needed of Spenser's debt to Virgil here, we have it within ten lines, when we are given a catalogue of trees, just as in Virgil when, at the portal to the Underworld, Aeneas and his men cut down pines, ilex, ash, oak and cypresses for the funeral pyre of Misenus.

But notice that, with Spenser's "loftie trees", it is not just sunlight that is blocked out, but starlight as well. And we are never too sure just what Spenser means by "power of any starre" (or, indeed, exactly what "perceable" means). It seems to be much more than just the lights of the heavens, and is strongly suggestive of correspondences—the idea, popular in Spenser's time, that the stars had significant influences not just on human lives (as in today's popular astrology) but upon the world of plants and animals as well. If this is the case, then Spenser's dark woods are doubly dangerous, for things beneath that green canopy are bereft of all beneficent heavenly influences, not just light—the canopy is 'unpierceable'.

It would seem natural enough to proceed from Spenser to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, since here, the subject matter of the great poem is directly concerned with Lucifer and the infernal realm. Moreover, Milton acknowledges the influence of the ancient authors but tells us that he intends "… to soar /Above th' Aonian Mount …". However, I would prefer to move to a less obvious connection, and one which brings us forward into the Romantic era.

And so, this leads me to my final example of the transmission of an idea and its magnification or transmogrification via the human imagination. John Keats wrote his unfinished poem *Hyperion* in 1819 when he was 24 years old. When I think of my own pitiable imaginative reach at the same age, I stand astonished at the sheer power of Keats' imagination, and cannot but think that he drew heavily upon past works to first ignite those powers. In his depiction of the fallen

Saturn, huge yet helpless, how much does Keats remind us of those depleted heroes in Homer's gloomy Underworld?

> Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
> Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
> Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,
> Sat gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone,
> Still as the silence round about his lair;
> Forest on forest hung about his head
> …

Later in this poem, Keats gives us an extraordinary image of a Goddess speaking words of comfort to the fallen Titan. To assume mere human speech would, of course, not fit the image of a Goddess, so Keats must find some way to get over this impasse. His achievement here is one of the greatest feats of imaginative power in all of the poetic literature known to me:

> As when, upon a tranced summer-night,
> Those green-rob'd senators of mighty woods,
> Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,
> Dream, and so dream all night without a stir,
> Save from one gradual solitary gust
> Which comes upon the silence, and dies off,
> As if the ebbing air had but one wave;
> So came these words and went;
> …

We are to imagine her voice as a tiny eddy, momentarily rippling the still air and barely disturbing that process of 'conversation' (for want of a better description) between the dreaming oak trees and the stars. It is an image of immense, but silent power almost entirely beyond human apprehension—we see but a tiny ripple of it. Recall, now, Virgil's giant elm tree, in the courtyard of the Underworld which "Spreads ancient boughs, her ancient arms where dreams/False dreams, the old tale goes, beneath each leaf/ Cling and are numberless …" Here, perhaps, is the raw material for Keats' vision. Unlike Spenser's trees, whose dense foliage blots out all light, the giant oaks of Keats, like most ancient trees, have massive limbs and relatively few leaves. Their leaves are light robes, not thick cloaks. This allows the starlight to filter down and "charm" the massy branches.

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For the remainder of this essay, I wish to return to the examples I have used and examine them from a different angle. Thus far, we have been dealing simply

with the subject matter involved in the transmission of certain ideas from one poet to another, but we have not really examined the question of how this process operates both to give us pleasure and to enlarge our experience of the world. And here, I wish to make use of the analysis contained in Owen Barfield's *Poetic Diction*.[5] The quotation from Newman at the beginning of this essay speaks of the benefits of enlarging the mind from the point of view of an observer, but appreciation of poetry is a very private business and it is very possible to imagine a person with a well-rounded education as still failing to be deeply moved by poetry—in other words, of lacking private benefits from exposure to poetic ideas. Moreover, in my discussions so far, I have been principally concerned with the poet, and not the poet's reader.

Barfield describes the experience of the aesthetic imagination as a "felt change of consciousness" and by "consciousness" he means "all my awareness of my surroundings … including my own feelings". He further suggests that our appreciation of a poem—that is to say, the emotional response of pleasure (but this word is far too restrictive)—is a transitory thing. The useful analogy he gives is of a coil of wire passing between the poles of a magnet to produce an electric current. Electricity is only generated when the coil is moving. In similar fashion, the mood or response we feel from a poem only occurs in that instant when we change from one state of consciousness to another. Of course, we may well commit the poem, or parts of the poem, to memory—as many readers will have done with one or more of my examples above—but we still find ourselves reciting the pieces audibly or inaudibly. Why? Is it not because we are looking, once again, to experience that emotion accompanying the "changed state of consciousness"?

The emotion itself is a much harder thing to talk about. There is, to be sure, a simple pleasure, almost physical, in hearing or reciting certain sorts of poetry purely because of its structure—the way the poem sounds. In my examples above, the Border Ballad fits this category beautifully. So too, I imagine, is Homer in the original Greek. Indeed, I have sat in a class where students with no knowledge of Greek (myself included) were spellbound purely by the sound of the work being read out by a competent speaker of Archaic Greek.

Closely connected to this form of pleasurable experience is that marvellous effect of reading a poem from a much earlier period in the history of the English language and being overcome by the beauty of the language itself. I have seen the line in Spenser "not perceable by power of any starre" used by many authors and,

[5] McGraw Hill, New York, 1964.

like myself, they are obviously moved by the archaisms in the language. Indeed, many modern poets have used this feature to great advantage. T.S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell come to mind immediately but, in the context of this present essay, one of the most powerful examples comes from Ezra Pound. Here is part of his version of the prelude to the Homeric *nekyia*, translated from the Latin of Andreas Divas into an earlier form of the English language (*Canto 1*):

> Came we then to the bounds of deepest water,
> To the Kimmerian lands, and peopled cities
> Covered with close-webbed mist, unpierced ever
> With glitter of sun-rays
> Nor with stars stretched, nor looking back from heaven
> Swartest night stretched over wretched men there.
> The ocean flowing backward, came we then to the place
> Aforesaid by Circe …

But something deeper is at work in our appreciation of poetry and it is to this that I now wish to conclude this essay. When Barfield writes of the sensations accompanying his "felt change of consciousness", he usually does so in terms of a pleasurable experience. But of course, it is much more intense than that. For me, the writer who comes closest to explaining this heightened mood is Barfield's friend and fellow Inkling, C.S. Lewis. In his autobiography, Lewis attempts to describe the state of mind after three childhood 'experiences'—two literary and one simply "the memory of a memory".[6] All of these "felt changes of consciousness" involved what he called "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction". It is neither pleasure nor happiness and he simply calls it Joy; hence the title of his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*. The title is entirely apt, because pleasure and even happiness is often within our power, but Joy is not. Recall Blake:

> He who binds to himself a joy
> Dot the winged life destroy;
> But he who kisses the joy as it flies
> Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

I think this description of Lewis's—of an overwhelming longing for something just beyond our knowledge—is true to experience, certainly to my own experience. For Lewis, of course, it was to attain fulfilment in the Christian religion but we can imagine a Platonist, for instance, finding the ultimate source in the Idea of the Good. From an ontological point of view we might well express it as that sudden apprehension of Beauty as an attribute of Being, and exclaim

[6] C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, Ch. 1, Harper Collins (Kindle Edition).

with St. Augustine: "Too late, too late have I loved thee, O Beauty of ancient days."[7]

[7] *Confessions*, Book X.

METAPHYSICS AND THE REALM OF FAERIE

There is a certain paradox in modernity concerning the status of spiritual beings. On the one hand, our scientific age tends to regard all talk of 'spirits' as mere hocus pocus or superstition. It is a sort of reversion to medievalism or primitive tribalism. And yet, modern stories, television series and films dealing with 'spiritual' beings have never been more popular. Indeed, many of the fairy stories or related stories of fantastic beings which were once found in children's books and comics are now hugely popular amongst adults. 'Spiritualism' and the occult is also flourishing.

This suggests some sort of innate need for such a category of beings. In this essay, I wish to explore this area in a little more detail. I intend to omit from my discussions the special case of the term 'spirit' as it applies to the soul in religious belief and, especially, in Christianity. My main concern will be with what are often termed 'nature spirits', and I include in this term such entities as fairies, elves, dwarfs, and so on. I give to them the class name 'faerie'.

In traditional metaphysics—that is, the science of being—it was commonly supposed or postulated that there was a class of being intermediate, as it were, between humans and angels. That is one explanation of the realm of faerie which we need to look at in some detail. The other common explanation is that the faerie is simply that collection of nature spirits which, in some way act as the active agents in nature.

Let us begin with nature spirits as active agents in nature and go back to the very beginning—in other words, to Homer. It is clear that, in Homeric Greece, what we might call the efficient cause of some natural event was always considered to be a spiritual action, not a material one. The ancient Greeks did not suppose that tree spirits, for instance, were simply tiny anthropomorphic creatures like 'gumnut babies' who activated the leaves etc. It seems to me that they were much more like Platonic formal causes which were also efficient causes. By way of example, let's look at Homer's taxonomy of waves.

If we take up the action in *The Iliad*, Bk 18 we find that Hector has killed Patroclus and Achilles mourns. His (Achilles) mother, Thetis, carries the news to all the water nymphs (of whom she is regent). At this point, we get a remarkable and very beautiful account of all the sea nymphs or Nereids, each one named for a particular attribute. Here are the relevant passages in Chapman's Homer—that translation which so moved John Keats:

… To her plaints the bright Nereides
Flocked all, how many those dark gulfs soever comprehend.
There Glauce, and Cymodoce, and Spio, did attend,
Nessea, and Cymothoe, and calm Amphithoe,
Thalia, Thoa, Panope, and swift Dynamene,
Actaea, and Limnoria, and Halia the fair,
Famed for the beauty of her eyes, Amathia for her hair, Isera,
Proto, Clymene, and curled Dexamene,—
Pherusa, Doris, and with these the smooth Amphinome,
Chaste Galatea so renowned, and Callianira, came,
With Doto and Orythia, to cheer the mournful dame.
Apseudes likewise visited, and Callianassa gave
Her kind attendance, and with her Agave graced the cave,
Nemertes, Msera, followed, Melita, Ianesse,
With Ianira, and the rest of those Nereides
That in the deep seas make abode …

Thirty-three names are given, but Hesiod tells us that there are fifty. All are females of great beauty. In considering the names of these spirits of the sea, Hilaire Belloc suggests that they denote types of waves and he credits Homer with such an intimate knowledge of the sea that he can supply a full taxonomy of waves. Thus, for Belloc, Limnoria denotes "the wave that runs along the shore", although other sources suggest the translation "of the salt marsh" and elect Actaea as the Nereid "of the sea-shore". Certainly, in Chapman's translation, we get strong hints of the Nereids as waves—"calm Amphithoe … swift Dynamene … curled Dexamene … smooth Amphinome".

But perhaps it is much more than a mere taxonomy of wave-types. We need to see the names as representing the 'informing' spirits which give each type of wave its particular character. Without this background, such a taxonomy is impossible—waves are merely momentary aspects of moving water, nothing else. This notion of a wave's 'spirit' is difficult for us to comprehend because the modern scientific mode of thought precludes any such descriptions. The shapes and movements of waves are wholly explicable in terms of natural cause and effect and one cannot impose a particular form on any wave. You need to think of Homer as giving us a description not of the material and short-lived wave-form but rather the actual Platonic Idea of that wave-form. In other words, he sees all of nature *sub specie aeternitatis*—under the aspect of eternity.

"The wave that runs along the shore" is, perhaps, the most familiar to us. It has a particular character, running up the sand with a sort of hissing noise and pushing a fringe of foam before it. Its advance and retreat is graceful. It is, in fact the last action of a dying wave, caressing the shore after a journey of who knows how far. John Keats saw it and gave this memorable description to a friend:

The rocks were silent—the wide sea did weave
An untumultuous fringe of silver foam
Along the flat brown sand. I was at home …
(Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds, last stanza).

There are other reasons to take Belloc's idea seriously. The Nereids are by no means the only spirits of the sea. The ancient Greeks had a multitude of sea deities or semi-deities, but none of their names seem so well attuned to the shape of waves. Take, for instance, Leukothea (white goddess), who saves Odysseus after his shipwreck. Modern commentaries often suggest she is the spirit of a sea bird—a gannet or gull. And yet Homer gives her the epithet "of the slim ankle"—a most beautiful description, for we at once associate her with feminine beauty. A Platonic Form perhaps?

Elsewhere in early Greek literature, we get an account of tree spirits and, again, a sort of taxonomy:

Meliae	Oak Trees
Oreads	Mountain Pines
Meliades	Fruit Trees
Daphnoi	Laurel
Balanis	Ilex
Karyai	Hazelnut
Moreau	Mulberry

Now, as an aside, when you first read *The Odyssey* in a good translation (I use E.V. Rieu), you have that sense of everything in nature being 'brand new'—shining and resplendent and without any defects. It has those 'new car' attributes of sight and smell and sound. I want to suggest that this is precisely for the reasons I have given above—Homer sees all nature *sub specie aeternitatis*.

And now, back to metaphysics. There were, I think, three reasons why early philosophers, both Neoplatonic and Christian, seriously considered the realm of faerie and all three can be sheeted home to Plato, especially in the *Timaeus*.

We recall that, in this Dialogue, the creator of the world does not do the actual creating but gives the job to the Demiurge—a sort of lesser God, one presumes. The reason is simple. Plato and the Neo-Platonists who followed him held to a principle that C.S. Lewis has dubbed "the Principle of the Triad". They reasoned that an all-powerful and perfect God would not be directly involved in the production of mutable nature—it was below his or her station! Logically, there needed to be a third party. We might be tempted to see the Christian notion of Angels in this fashion but, of course, the Christian God, as the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, was very much involved in this material world. Leaving this aside, we can see a possible explanation for intermediate spirits in terms of 'agents' for some higher power.

The second possible explanation also comes from Plato. Again, in the *Timaeus*—one of the few Platonic texts available to the medieval scholars—we have this explanation for the creation of the world:

> Let us therefore state the reason why the framer of this universe of change framed it at all. He was good, and what is good has no particle of envy in it; being therefore without envy he wished all things to be as like himself as possible.

Now, if not to Plato himself then certainly to the Neo-Platonists who followed him, what this meant was that the ideal Absolute, in order to be ideal, must express all possibilities of being so as to be beyond all possibilities of enhancement or diminution. This, in turn led to a concept called 'The Great Chain of Being'. Here we must imagine a hierarchy of being, with God at the top and stones and other inanimate objects at the bottom. Humans are towards the upper end, jellyfish toward the lower. Importantly though, there can be no gaps—that is, no vacancy where there is the possibility of some form of existence without its actuality. For the early scholars, then, one had to allow for the possibility of creatures somewhat below the angels but not quite human or animal. Opinions differed. Some scholars thought that the Longaevi (the Medieval name for fairies, elves, etc.) might be angels who, at the time of the rebellion were neither on Lucifer's side or Michael's. Others thought that they were a third rational species, existing between angels and humans. By the time of James the First in England, though, the Longaevi were regarded as a species of devil and denounced. If you want a paradox, consider this. At about the same time that Edmund Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene* in honour of Elizabeth I, old women were being burnt to death for supposedly consorting with fairy folk and "the Queen of Elfame".

Closely related to the Great Chain of Being is the Principle of Plenitude—a term coined by Arthur Lovejoy in his classic work *The Great Chain of Being*. Since the creator God is omnipotent, every possible form of existence must be present, as I pointed out in the last paragraph. To suggest otherwise is to suggest the possibility of some deficiency in power. In other words, all possible niches (I borrow a word from ecologists) must be populated. St Thomas Aquinas famously wrote that "a world comprised of one angel and a stone is more complete than a world containing two angels". Does this sound familiar? Indeed, it is a very popular notion in modern ecological thinking.

And so, if you think that the old notions of The Great Chain of Being and of 'plenitude' are now dead, think again. Almost daily in the media someone announces that this forest or that reef must be protected to "maintain biodiversity". Why is a forest of say, eighty species better or more complete than

one with twenty? "Because it is more diverse", people say. But that does not answer the question because the argument is circular. "Because the gene pool is greater" say the Darwinists. But this, too, is circular. Why is a bigger gene pool better? Because it allows for more diversity. The simple fact of the matter is that we value diversity in itself. We cannot blame the ancients, then, if they took the argument a step further and ensured that all ecological niches, including spiritual ones, were filled. Fairies increase diversity! Can we have a National Recovery Plan for Threatened Longaevi? We might even get a new series from David Attenborough—*The Life of Elves*.

There remains now the difficult business of commenting upon the relationship between the world of faerie and the world of humans. In today's children's books, fairies are tiny, gossamer-winged females with wands who go about the world distributing goodness. It was not so in the past. True enough, when we read Homer, most of his nature spirits seem friendly enough (or quite uninterested in humans). The exception might be the Erinyes or Furies (the Harpies of Virgil), but they are not really nature spirits in my interpretation of that term. By the time we get to the Middle Ages though, the faerie folk are much more dangerous.

Not only were they responsible for a great deal of ordinary mischief—nasty natural events like whirlwinds—but also for much more serious things such as stealing or changing children and even taking human lives. Think of those stories about Changelings, or of W.B. Yeats' poem *The Host of the Air*, where the Sidhe (ancient and dangerous spirits of sky and earth) take away a young bride. The dark side of the faerie world is very apparent in the story of *Thomas the Rymer* (see page 7),who disappears and is bound in the service of the Elf-Queen for seven years. Here, it is worth repeating part of the poem to indicate the terrible nature of the landscape:

> O they rade on, and farther on,
> And they waded thro rivers aboon the knee,
> And they saw neither sun nor moon,
> But they heard the roaring of the sea.
> It was mirk mirk night, and there was nae stern light,
> And they waded thro' red blude to the knee;
> For a' the blude that's shed on earth
> Rins thro' the springs o that countrie.

One has the impression of the Longaevi existing more or less parasitically on human suffering and death. As I pointed out in the previous essay, the description of the approach to Elf-land is very reminiscent of Homer's description of the approach to the underworld. *Thomas the Rhymer* was almost certainly the inspiration for a famous poem by Keats—*La Belle Dame sans Merci.*

Perhaps this dangerous aspect of the faerie that we find in old literature and poetry has some link to the Old Testament because there, the spirits of nature in

the desert wilderness are decidedly nasty. Spirit creatures like Azazel, Lilith, Seirim and Tanin are truly frightening. The *daemons* of the Greeks have become demons. Some scholars suggest that the Old Testament desert spirits are a sort of remnant of Zoroastrian dualism which the Jews would have encountered during the Babylonian captivity. The really horrific demons are nearly always depicted as being either partly formless or combing two forms in some unnatural way. This is the ultimate in devilish anti-Platonism. Have a look at the famous painting by Bruegel the Elder entitled *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*. This captures the idea perfectly.

But there us another possible reason for the idea of the dangerous fairy. When you read *Thomas the Rhymer*, it is clear that what the realm of faerie offers is a 'third way', between good and evil (not in the Nietzchean sense). In this poem, Thomas is shown three paths—the narrow path to heaven, the broad path to hell and the path to elf-land. The catch is that you surrender your free will if you chose the middle way. That is why the faerie world is dangerous.

But, for all that, it has to be said that the realm of faerie is full of contradictions and paradoxes. This is nowhere better illustrated than in the traditional view of fairies that one could still find in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales until relatively recent times. There were good and bad fairies but, even with the good fairies, one never quite trusted them. Perhaps that is why they departed from us!

PETRARCH AND THE MOUNTAIN

The Perennial Problem of Truth in History

One small episode in late medieval history is often singled out for special mention by historians, especially those with an interest in environmental history. This concerns the ascent of Mt Ventoux in France by Petrarch in 1336. Kenneth Clark, the noted art historian, supposes that Petrarch "was, as everybody knows, the first to climb a mountain for its own sake, and to enjoy the view from the top" (*Landscape into Art*, 1949). Many other historians quote this same event as providing the earliest example of the new humanistic, Renaissance spirit where nature was enjoyed for its own sake. I have come across this assertion in several history books and commentaries on the man-in-nature question.

In Petrarch's account, contained in a letter to an acquaintance, he goes on to relate how he then opened his small copy of Augustine's *Confessions* at random and there lighted upon the words "and men go to admire the high mountains, the vast floods of the sea ... and the revolutions of the stars … and desert themselves". This had the effect of checking his admiration of the view such that he closed the book, "angry with myself that I still admired earthly things". This is quoted by many modern commentators who wish to show us how the fetters of medieval Christianity prevented humans from appreciating nature and celebrating her beauties. In the process, they also fire a broadside at St Augustine, quoting selectively from Book X of the *Confessions* and neglecting to put his comments in their proper perspective—he merely wished to show the power of human recollection.

Can it be true that no-one prior to Petrarch actually enjoyed the landscape? This, surely, is a most extraordinary claim, yet it seems to go largely unchallenged. I think that anyone with a moderate knowledge of history and/or literature could provide dozens of examples which oppose this notion of a sort of historical watershed in 1336 when, so the theory goes, Petrarch suddenly decided that the view from a mountain was pleasurable. So why does the myth persist?

The answer, I think, has a great deal to do with predisposing attitudes of the historians—their 'principle of interpretation', as it were. They come to their data with a set of assumptions which wholly determine how those data are to be interpreted. Of course, no-one can write history without some principle of

interpretation because without such a principle, history would consist entirely of a vast assembly of dates and events entirely unconnected with each other—just data, no 'story'. We expect, though, that any such principle will take due cognizance of the facts as presented in the original sources (mindful, of course, that the very selection of facts in those original sources is itself subject to some principle of selection). Thus, we expect that some attempt will be made to back up a claim not just with examples, but with the absence of significant counter-examples. This brings to mind Sir Karl Popper's famous 'principal of falsifiability' in the sciences: no empirical hypothesis, proposition, or theory can be considered scientific if it does not admit the possibility of a contrary case.

In the case of Petrarch's alpine experience, I would argue that the majority of later historians recording the event had already decided that the 'Dark Ages' were indeed, dark. What we see here is a clear example of a one-sided history war where all of human experience that came before the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment is regarded as being either horribly deformed by a world-hating priesthood, or tragically misrepresented by fear, ignorance, and superstition. Life was not just "ugly, brutish and short", but also incapable of climbing to the heights of human intellectual enjoyment. Such is the strength of this assumption that it takes on the proportions of a revealed Truth against which all argument is spurious.

I return to Kenneth Clark again to give you an example of this sort of thinking. Discussing the use of symbols in medieval art, Clark supposes that the medieval mind could not represent nature 'realistically' because the 'nature' perceived by our senses was a debased and sinful nature. Where nature is occasionally represented realistically, as in the carved foliage capitals on Rheims Cathedral (13th C), he supposes that such examples "break through the frozen crust of monastic fear". Now he admits that the average layman would not have thought it wrong to enjoy nature. Instead, this same average layman "would simply have said that nature was not enjoyable". So there we have it! No medieval peasant, labouring with the hoe, could have gained any amelioration of his situation by delighting in the sights, sounds and smells of nature about him. How then, are we to explain those medieval poems by the *vagantes* (wandering poets), extolling the beauties of nature? Here, by way of example, is an Easter poem by Sedulius Scottus (9thC) as translated by Helen Waddell:

> Last night did Christ the Sun rise from the dark,
> The mystic harvest of the fields of God,
> And now the little wandering tribes of bees
> Are brawling in the scarlet flowers abroad.

> The winds are soft with birdsong; all night long
> Darkling the nightingale her descant told,
> And now inside church doors the happy folk
> The Alleluia chant a hundredfold.
> O father of thy folk, be thine by right
> The Easter joy, the threshold of the light.

Or, we might consider this fragment of Celtic poetry, taken from a longer poem, *May-time*, by an unknown author in the 10th C and translated by Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson:

> May-time, fair season, perfect is its aspect then; blackbirds sing a full song if there be a scanty beam of day.
> The hardy, busy cuckoo calls, welcome noble summer!
> It calms the bitterness of bad weather, the branching wood is a prickly hedge.
> Summer brings low the little stream, the swift herd makes for the water, the long hair of the heather spreads out, the weak white cotton-grass flourishes.
> …

Even with pre-Christian history, many modern commentators wish to downgrade the 'nature experience'. Ancient history is full of examples where some elements in nature, far from being debased, sinful, or less than real, were regarded as sacred (as in sacred springs or sacred woods, for instance). Here again though, the modern historians and commentators can easily brush this aside. The classicist W.R. Halliday, in his account of Greek divination, supposes that "the sanctity of rivers in Greece is largely to be sought in the value naturally attaching to water in a dry and thirsty land". D.R. Dicks, another well-known classicist, supposes that the stars assumed their religious significance (as gods) amongst "earliest cavemen" because they engendered a feeling of awe and wonder and, therefore, needed some explanation. There is an 'instrumentalist illusion' here because religious values, if they are called upon to justify secular interests and aspirations, must previously have been recognized as such. As Leszek Kolakowski has pointed out, the sacred must exist before it can be exploited:

> If, at some point we pass from the stage of expressing our needs directly to the stage of invoking the sanction of the sacred … the passage from one stage to the other is not explained by the content of those needs alone. It remains as mysterious as ever. (*Modernity on Endless Trial*, 1990)

But, in both the cases cited above, it is assumed that 'primitive' minds invent gods or sacred objects to explain or justify things. The possibility of an order of reality beyond the scope of the human mind is simply out of the question.

On the specific topic of mountain views, let us consider a few examples overlooked in Clark's one-sided account of pre-Renaissance humanity. We could start with Homer and the very birth of the Western Tradition. Is it at all possible to read *The Odyssey* without getting a distinct message that Homer loved the natural world around him? Consider that lovely passage where Odysseus describes his homeland to King Alcinous (Book 9):

> My home is under the clear skies of Ithaca. Our landmark is Mount Neriton with its quivering leaves. Other islands are clustered around it, Dulichium and Same and wooded Zacynthus. But Ithaca, the farthest out to sea, lies slanting to the west, whereas the others face the dawn and rising sun. It is a rough land but nurtures fine men. And I, for one, know of no sweeter sight for a man's eye than his own country.

Moving to the early Christian era, I would like to quote two short extracts from the writings of the "Cappadocian Brothers"—St Basil and St Gregory of Nyssa (4th C). Here is part of Basil's description of his monastery site at Pontus:

> I departed into Pontus in quest of a place to live in. There God has opened on me a spot exactly answering to my taste, so that I actually see before my eyes what I have often pictured to my mind in idle fancy. There is a lofty mountain covered with thick woods, watered towards the north with cool and transparent streams. A plain lies beneath, enriched by the waters which are ever draining off from it; and skirted by a spontaneous profusion of trees almost thick enough to be a fence; so as even to surpass Calypso's Island, which Homer seems to have considered the most beautiful spot on the earth. Indeed it is like an island, enclosed as it is on all sides; for deep hollows cut off two sides of it; the river, which has lately fallen down a precipice, runs all along the front and is impassable as a wall; while the mountain extending itself behind, and meeting the hollows in a crescent, stops up the path at its roots …

In the writings of Basil's younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa, there is another good example of a very evident love of the natural world. In his letter to Adelphius the Lawyer (Letter XV) he describes his home at Vanota in word-pictures of great beauty, supposing that anything Homer might say about the beauties of Ithaca is poor by comparison:

> For I, though I have before this seen much, and that in many places, and have also observed many things by means of verbal description in the accounts of old writers, think both all I have seen, and all of which I have heard, of no account in comparison with the loveliness that is to be found here. Your Helicon is nothing: the Islands of the Blest are a fable: the Sicyonian plain is a trifle: the accounts of the Peneus are another case of poetic exaggeration—that river which they say by overflowing with its rich current the banks which flank its course makes for the Thessalians their far-famed Tempe. Why, what beauty is there in any one of these places I have

> mentioned, such as Vanota can show us of its own? For if one seeks for natural beauty in the place, it needs none of the adornments of art: and if one considers what has been done for it by artificial aid, there has been so much done, and that so well, as might overcome even natural disadvantages. The gifts bestowed upon the spot by Nature who beautifies the earth with unstudied grace are such as these: below, the river Halys makes the place fair to look upon with his banks, and gleams like a golden ribbon through their deep purple, reddening his current with the soil he washes down. Above, a mountain densely overgrown with wood stretches with its long ridge, covered at all points with the foliage of oaks, worthy of finding some Homer to sing its praises more than that Ithacan Neriton, which the poet calls "far-seen with quivering leaves" …

These examples could be expanded a hundredfold to cover a thousand years of history in the West, but I fear that it would not make one ounce of difference. The verdict has long since been passed on human history prior to the Enlightenment. The staggering truth is that our supposed more enlightened and sympathetic view of the natural world around us has failed to prevent the escalation of a whole range of environmental problems. While some may be the inescapable result of human population increase, many others are simply due to human avarice. In my own lifetime, the average size of a new home in Australia has risen significantly, but the average family size has fallen sharply. We, who 'know' nature so much better than our early forebears, have used that knowledge to squander its riches. Do we really appreciate it better than our distant ancestors?

WHY PHILOSOPHY BURIES ITS UNDERTAKERS

Metaphysics and Meaning

There is a celebrated passage in Boswell's *Life of Johnson* where Boswell broached the subject of Bishop Berkeley's idealist philosophy and his "ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter". When he then suggested that the idea could not be refuted, Johnson moved rapidly to a nearby large stone and "struck his foot with mighty force" against it, till he rebounded from it. As he was doing so, he said "I refute it thus". When we read this passage, we are impressed with Johnson's common-sense approach to things. His answer appeals to us because the notion that matter is an illusion strikes us as plain silly. And yet, when we begin to reflect upon our own experience of the world we are forced to conclude that things are not always as they seem to be as represented by our senses and, indeed, many of our concepts do not appear to have their origin in sensory inputs. Through this gap in our understanding has poured out a huge range of diverse philosophies, all hoping either to deliver certitude or to convince us of the impossibility of doing so.

While the situation of imperfect knowledge has always been with us, only in the last few hundred years has it become a major concern for philosophers. For over a thousand years in the West, roughly from the time of Augustine through to the Middle Ages, a marriage (albeit uneasy at times) of Greek philosophy with Christian theology provided a generally accepted solution to the uncertainties of human knowledge. This was achieved by allowing what might be called a 'super sensible certainty'—*a priori* knowledge of what was true by what was, in essence, a sharing of the human intellect in the Divine mind. For Plato, it was an access to the intelligible world of the Forms whereas for Augustine such knowledge was an "illumination" from the mind of God. It is important here to stress that this traditional method of philosophical enquiry combined both an *a priori* and an *a posteriori* approach, famously defined by Anselm of Canterbury as *Credo ut intelligam*—faith aiding reason. This situation began to change after Descartes introduced the notion of what has been called 'hyberbolic doubt'. At about the same time, Francis Bacon dismissed any use of an *a priori* approach, supposing that this simply spins the threads of a metaphysical fabric from the contents of a purely human mind without reference to the world as apprehended by the senses. The subsequent movement in philosophical ideas very roughly tracked the rise of the scientific method and of scientific enquiry in general. We are told that the

principal motive which impelled Immanuel Kant to produce his philosophy was a desire to bring a proper scientific outlook to the whole discipline. He was impressed by the huge advances made in mathematics and physics and the sort of systematic approach of fact-gathering which had been championed by Bacon as the only way to gain certain knowledge. Why should not philosophy, which seemed to be in a state of disarray (partly as a result of Hume's scepticism), benefit from the same approach?

The subsequent history of philosophy in the West suggests that Kant's great project was not successful in the way that he had hoped. No-one could doubt the brilliance of his insights, but his radical new theories put an impenetrable barrier between things in themselves and human experiences (noumena and phenomena) and gave impetus to newer strands of philosophical thought far removed from Kant's original desire. If anything, the result has been to muddy the philosophical waters even more, producing ever more abstruse theories, often mutually incompatible. Indeed, it is a feature of both modern philosophy and certain branches of modern science that its theories or explanations are often only accessible to the select few who can decipher them (or claim to). There may be people who can fully understand Heidegger, but I am certainly not one of them. Likewise, in theoretical physics there are characters who write at length about the curvature of space and its implications regarding our common notions of time, etc, but unless you are a mathematical genius, it is unlikely that you will fully understand the proffered explanation. There are, of course, simplified versions appearing in popular science magazines, but these demand more faith than understanding. The same is true of 'popular' accounts of much modern philosophy.

Here we encounter a difficulty which might well be called the Socratic Dilemma, as distinct from the well-known Socratic Paradox. The dictum "knowledge is virtue" seems to imply an identity between human intelligence and the ability to discern good from bad. It almost seems that, the smarter you are, the better hope you have of seeing things as they really are. All of this invites the charge of Gnosticism—the possession of a special and privileged knowledge which is not available to people of merely average intelligence and learning. But there is another disturbing feature of this claimed knowledge too. The Gnostics do not always agree with each other! In fact, they disagree violently on occasions. The scientists perhaps present a more united front but dissent is still common. Witness the current debate concerning the modelling used in the science of climate change.

I mention all of the above simply by way of prefacing a discussion of matters which lie at the very heart of the quest for meaning and the claims of human knowledge. What can we know and how can this knowledge be validated so as to provide a universally accessible explanation of the cosmos and of our own existence? These questions actually define the quest of philosophy and act as a sort of Pole Star guiding the whole history of philosophy in the West since the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers. From the point of view of human reason alone, omitting the matter of faith, they have never been answered satisfactorily (that is to say, with unanimous or even majority approval) and yet, we cannot seem to rid ourselves of the urge to find some definitive answers by the use of human reason alone. If we did find such conclusive answers then philosophy would, perhaps, disappear since what were formerly philosophical ideas would then become scientific facts.

It is not the business of philosophy to provide 'mechanical' explanations as to how we obtain knowledge of the world around us (i.e. by what actual electro-chemical or physical process)—that is the province of science—but it is certainly the business of philosophy to comment upon whether or not the knowledge that we do gain (by whatever mechanism) is reliable. Moreover, philosophy has the task of explaining how we are able to proceed from the multiplicity of sensation, however mediated, to the unity of knowledge. The sort of analysis needed is not one amenable to the reductive processes of science but, rather, to the synthesis of philosophical thinking.

If all this seems to be far removed from the everyday of life, it is only because we rarely stop to reflect on the extraordinary fact that we can know objects with such seeming ease as to be totally unaware of it most of the time. But it is extraordinary that a biological entity—a trousered or skirted ape—should be not just a maker of meaning but an entity capable of reflecting on this ability. Not for nothing did Plato suppose that a sense of wonder is the mark of the philosopher and the origin of philosophy. No merely biological mechanism, however complex, can explain this for us. The attempts made by both the cognitive scientists and the sociobiologists in this area are ludicrously inadequate. The latter, for instance, usually explain their way out of the problem with a stock reply—"there is a gene for that".

Historically, the quest for certainty has turned out to be a quest for unity—a way of pulling together the manifold of the experienced world into some overarching concept of the Parmenidean One. This endeavour of the human mind was traditionally known by the term metaphysics (or the science of the One). This was the core business of philosophy and also, an important aspect of

Christian theology in the West. There were, of course, other important aspects of philosophy—logic, for instance—but by the very use of logic itself, one needed some overarching context to validate human reasoning.

Today the word metaphysics has been rendered almost useless as a philosophical term. Like the word love, which can mean anything from the act of copulation (as in that rather ludicrous phrase 'making love') to the essence of the Divine, metaphysics has been pressed into service to describe a multitude of different ideas. Traditionally though, the word metaphysics was much more tightly defined and in order to demonstrate this, we must first go back to the early development of Western philosophy and revisit some more general concepts and ideas.

It is probable that metaphysical enquiry is as old as human self-consciousness but it is customary for us to associate its birth with the pre-Socratic philosophers and especially with Parmenides of Elea (circa 500 BC). Ironically, we have only a few fragments of his work, these having been preserved in the writings of later commentators and quoted to augment or support some idea or other. The surviving fragments of Parmenides' great poem on being are somewhat obscure, but the main theme is quite obvious. There is being, and since being is, it is impossible for us to conceive of non-existence. Being, then, is absolute.

It remained for successive generations of philosophers, including the great Plato, to develop from this concept of being some logical conclusions. If being did not exist, there could be nothing and, thus, being is necessary. If it is necessary, it must be given all at once and, hence, is immutable. Since being is coterminous with the One, nothing can be added to it, since all that could be added would still be being. In other words, there cannot be more in the multiplicity of things than in the One. The historian of medieval philosophy, Etienne Gilson, gives us a particularly good example of this latter conclusion by referring to mathematics. If we try to reconstitute the number one from the series half, plus one third, plus one sixth, etc, the series will extend indefinitely without ever attaining unity.

Here, of course, a problem arises. If being is immutable and unitary, how are we to explain a world in which we experience a multiplicity of contingent things? In other words, how do we relate the One (seemingly demanded by the exercise of human reason) to the many (equally demanded by our experience of the world around us)? To answer this question, Plato erected his theory of Forms. It was a nice try, but not altogether satisfactory. The status of these Forms was never fully explicated. Moreover, there was still the problem of explaining how the immutable One could or would produce or entail the world of 'becoming', otherness, and multiplicity. Plato's difficulty is highlighted in the *Timaeus*, where

the job of creating the visible universe is given to a Demiurge or intermediary to overcome the obvious difficulty associated with having a perfect and self-sufficient Unity produce something 'extra' which was both impermanent and ceaselessly changing. There were attempts by later Neo-Platonists to rectify this problem by attributing the world of becoming to a sort of overflowing of goodness in the One. The One, in order to fulfil a principle of plenitude, must give existence to every possible mode of being, including modes which are both impermanent and changeable. In other words, every possibility of being must be realised for the sake of completeness. But there cannot be an 'overflow' unless there is a limit, and the One is, by definition, without limit in this sense. An emanationist account is, of course, possible but the same problem arises. Why would a perfect, changeless, and self-sufficient One cause itself to be diverted into a sort of anabranch of temporary and imperfect existence when the end result is merely for the latter to revert back to its source without any change having taken place?

These sorts of problems, arising from our attempts to achieve some sort of unity in a world of plurality could be called the Parmenidean paradox. On the one hand, we seem to have this inbuilt need to gather all of our experience into some sort of unity yet, when we attempt to do so, we run into all sorts of epistemological problems. This is why we must ultimately have recourse to faith in any system of belief. This is as true for E.O. Wilson or Richard Dawkins as it is for the Pope. Here it is important to stress that the apprehension of being does not necessarily presuppose a religious belief. It is antecedent to belief in a God and arises from the reflective experience of the mind. That is not to say that it is an automatic sort of knowledge. It seems to be the case that some people can apprehend it and others can't and no reason can be given for the difference—"the Spirit bloweth where it listeth".

Various strategies have been developed to deal with this apparently self-defeating status of metaphysics and they have been nicely summarised by Leszek Kolakowski in a small book entitled M*etaphysical Horror* (Blackwell, London, 1988). A common strategy is simply to deny that the problem exists by declaring such questions as meaningless. This was the move taken by A.J. Ayer in his well-known book*, Language, Truth and Logic* (Penguin Books, 1990 (reprint]):

> Our charge against the metaphysician is not that he attempts to employ the understanding in a field where it cannot profitably venture, but that he produces sentences which fail to conform to conditions under which alone a sentence can be literally significant.

Ayer goes on to introduce his "criterion of verifiability"—"We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express". Unfortunately for Ayer and his followers, the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, central to logical positivism, was soon called into question by W.V. O. Quine. As Kolakowski points out, "Die-hard analytical philosophers and old-style phenomenologists who openly philosophize within this framework are now, however numerous, endangered species."

A more popular and enduring solution to the problem is to adopt what might be called the 'inclusive' approach, usually based on Wittgenstein's "language game". Your explanation is just as valid as mine, even though the two differ because we are obeying different rules in different language games, or historical settings, or cultural backgrounds, etc. So your explanation is entirely valid in your language game, whilst mine is valid in a separate one. And so, to quote Kolakowski again:

> A philosophical truth, a solution of the problem may indeed be valid but, if so, it is valid in relation to a game, a culture or a collective or individual goal. We simply cannot go any further; we have no tools to force the door leading us beyond language, beyond a set of contingent cultural norms or beyond practical imperatives which mould our thinking process.

In such a situation 'anything goes'. Indeed, one of the modern philosophical gurus, Paul Feyerbend, actually suggested this line from Cole Porter in his book *Against Method*. Of course, if anything goes, then my recourse to metaphysics is just as valid as your use of, say, cognitive science or sociobiology. To overcome this problem of thus letting metaphysics in via the back door, so to speak, less relative relativists simply decide to invalidate metaphysics in advance so that the question 'what is real' is deemed to be illicit. Here of course we come to that epistemological problem which has been around since the time of the ancient Greeks. If we really insist on relativism, there is little point in distinguishing between metaphysical and empirical questions. As Kolakowski points out, we cannot make a set of questions permanently invalid unless we implicitly appeal to the permanent standards of rationality.

But this attempt to remove metaphysics from philosophy can also be viewed from a much wider perspective. In his book, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, Etienne Gilson surveys almost eight centuries of philosophical thought from Peter Abelard to Karl Marx and finds this one consistent theme: whenever philosophers use the techniques of disciplines other than philosophy to investigate philosophical questions, they inevitably fall into error and their

theories are eventually abandoned or severely modified. Thus, Abelard had recourse to logic alone, whilst Descartes employed mathematics and geometry. With Kant, it was what Gilson calls "physicism" and with Comte and his followers, "sociologism". These observations led Gilson to erect several laws or principles pertaining to the philosophical method:

1. *Philosophy always buries its undertakers*. By this he means that each new theory, hailed as the 'solution' to philosophical problems—i.e. the death of philosophy—is regularly attended by its later revival in some newer scheme which, in its turn, is superseded, and so on. I recall reading, I think in Ben Rogers' biography of A.J. Ayer, that Ayer himself, after publication of *Language, Truth and Logic*, had (only half-jokingly) talked of "the end of philosophy".

2. *By his very nature, man is a metaphysical animal*. By this, Gilson means that the failure of philosophical schemes invariably relates to their abandonment of basic metaphysical principles natural to human thought. Discussing Hume and Kant, he puts this principle in perspective this way:

> Hume had destroyed both metaphysics and science (Humean scepticism); in order to save science, Kant decided to sacrifice metaphysics. Now it is the upshot of the Kantian experiment that, if metaphysics is arbitrary knowledge, science also is arbitrary knowledge; hence it follows that our belief in the objective validity of science itself stands or falls with our belief in the objective validity of metaphysics. The new question then is no longer, why is metaphysics a necessary illusion, but rather: Why is metaphysics necessary, and how is it that it has given rise to so many illusions?

Gilson answers this last question by developing a series of arguments leading to conclusions which comprise the remainder of his 'laws' or principles:

3. *Metaphysics is the knowledge gathered by a naturally transcendent reason in its search for the first principles, or first causes, of what is given in sensible experience.*

4. *As metaphysics aims at transcending all particular knowledge, no particular science is competent either to solve metaphysical problems, or to judge their metaphysical solutions.*

5. *The failures of metaphysicians flow from their unguarded use of a principle of unity present in the human mind.*

6. *Since being is the first principle of all human knowledge, it is a fortiori the first principle of metaphysics.*

7. *All failures of metaphysics should be traced to the fact that the first principle of human knowledge has been either overlooked or misused by the metaphysicians.*

Why is being the first principle of human knowledge? Because we are simply incapable of conceiving of its absence within our usual logical rules of thinking

and, therefore, it must be the absolute ground of all knowledge. Incorrigible sceptics might answer that it cannot be an *a priori* certainty that our logic is infallible so that talk of some Absolute is not permissible in this way. But this is to miss the point. The necessity of the existence of such an Absolute is its own necessity and not ours. As Kolakowski points out, "our logic discovers the self-contradiction in the Absolute's non-existence because its non-self-contradiction is actually there and not vice versa".

Granted that metaphysics does pose difficult problems, this still does not explain why modernity is so keen to dispense with it. Perhaps the answer lies in a persistent attempt to see the human mind as something of a detached observer looking out at 'things' which exist around it and are quite separate from it. This view is obviously important to scientists, especially cognitive scientists whose aim it is to fully identify the workings of the human mind. In order to do this, one must of necessity treat the mind as an object available for analysis, just like any other. Metaphysics clearly hints at things which lie outside the purview of a reductive scientific method and thus it suggests a limit to any full analysis of the working of the human mind. That there might be things unsolvable by any science now or in the future is an uncomfortable notion, for it hints at the possibility of other ways of knowing—religion for instance. More generally, it reopens the gate which was closed to metaphysics by empiricism and the analytical tradition in philosophy. What Rough Beast might enter the now unprotected groves of Academe and the fields of Parnassus? The answer, of course, is rather obvious—the very same one that first grazed there!

What are these things that lie outside the purview of a reductive scientific analysis? Surely, as Gilson claims, they relate to the ability of the human mind to produce some unity out of a mass of sensory data—sometimes called *percepts*. In other words, we need some explanation of how we get from raw data (or percept) to idea—that brick, this table. Empiricists are hazy on this score. Locke seems to treat percepts as if they were ideas whereas Hume gives us the rather unhelpful notion of ideas as "sense impressions". Neither of these approaches explains how we get from the multiplicity of raw data as input to the finished product—the unitary idea. Hume blithely assumes that some "associating quality"—resemblance, contiguity, or causation—does the job, but we must then ask how such qualities can arise from sense-impressions (since no other origin is allowed in his philosophy).

For Coleridge, on the other hand, the process of getting from percepts to ideas was carried out by what he called the "primary imagination" and here, at last, we are getting to the heart of the matter. I take it that Coleridge's primary

imagination is analogous to what Aristotle called the "agent intellect", and which the scholastic philosophers further subdivided into a sequence of actions involving apprehension, judgement, and reasoning. In the scholastic schema, it is important to note that the judgement implies the use of some sort of reference point and this reference point is being itself. To make sure that what I judge to be the case is really so (in uniting concepts and affirming or denying that this is the way they are found outside the mind), I have need to return to the source from which all my knowledge ultimately comes—being itself. In other words for the scholastics, there is a direct relationship between being as the One and that facility in the human mind which transforms mere data into an intelligible whole. On this point Platonists and traditional Christians would have some basic agreement.

Now, one can understand why empiricists would want to rid the world of metaphysics, but this does not explain the virtual absence of metaphysics in modern Christianity. Here we must look for other reasons. Historically, there has always been an uneasy relationship between religion and metaphysics. This applies not only to Christianity, but to Islam as well. We might recall that Al Ghazali, in the 10th century, wrote his *Incoherence of the Philosophers* against the deployment of philosophy in religious matters. In Christianity, it was often thought that the God of the philosophers (the One) was far too abstract and remote from the biblical God and the Christ of the New Testament to be of any real value to the faithful. But the fact remains that metaphysics has, for a thousand years or more, played an important part in Christian theology. The marriage of philosophy and theology, first begun by Augustine and the Greek Fathers and later developed by the medieval Scholastics, brought Athens and Jerusalem together in a synthesis which was only finally destroyed in our own era. In an After-Forward to *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy*, Anthony Kenny suggests that scholastic philosophy, Marxism, existentialism, and analytic philosophy were the four major branches or lines of enquiry in philosophy until the early 1960s when they all began to disintegrate.

Today, it is difficult to know just what sort of philosophical backup, if any, accompanies religious belief in the West. It certainly does seem that a very hazy sort of existentialism is at work—one which almost seems to involve a total surrender of rational thought along the lines of Kiergegaard's "leap of faith". One can understand why. In the Gospel account of Martha and Mary we have those well-known words—"only one thing is needful and Mary has chosen the better part". But, of course, this is not to say that Martha's part was unnecessary. The pre-eminence of faith and devotion does not negate the need for rational thought in developing doctrine, and such a process will, at some stage, always need to

refer back to metaphysical principles. No human organisation without rules or conditions of association—even one claiming Divine origin—can persist as an organisation in the long term. A believing Christian will, of course, point out that the persistence of his or her faith is guaranteed by Scripture but, of course, such persistence might be in places other than its historical home in the West.

This question of the persistence of beliefs based on a combination of faith and rational enquiry is of particular importance in an age when traditional standards in morality are being attacked in every quarter. We have a situation today where advances in science and technology have far outstripped our ability to apply widely accepted moral judgements to them. Huge controversies rage over matters such as human cloning and other forms of genetic manipulation in humans. We seem to have no agreed way of adjudicating on such matters.

This was a central concern for Alasdair McIntyre in his 1981 book, *After Virtue*. He begins by asking us to consider a science fiction scenario in which some great environmental disaster is blamed by the general public on the scientists. Violent mobs storm the research institutes and wreck them. Scientists are lynched and books of science are burnt. Eventually, a government is established whose purpose is to purge science and scientists from the land. Later, a few enlightened people come to see this destruction as an error and attempts are made to re-constitute the sciences. But all that remains of this former scientific knowledge are bits and pieces of half burnt manuscripts, partially wrecked equipment, etc. "Nonetheless", MacIntyre says, "all these fragments are re-embodied in a set of practices which go under the revived names of physics, chemistry, and biology". But, of course, these 'practices' have been cobbled together without any reference to that general context in which they were originally constituted. Thus, many of the beliefs presupposed by the use of such terms as 'neutrino', 'mass', 'specific gravity', etc. would have been lost and there would appear to be an element of arbitrariness and even of choice in the application of such expressions (almost certainly, MacIntyre has in mind a famous science fiction story called *A Canticle for Leibowitz*). This, says MacIntyre, is exactly the state of moral discourse today: "the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world I have described". We have, in other words, lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality. Hence we get a variety of incommensurable positions on moral questions and a variety of ways in which the history of moral philosophy is interpreted.

It is my belief that this situation is a direct consequence of the absence of metaphysics in modern philosophy and its effective gelding in modern-day

Christianity in the West. We are without a map in a totally strange landscape. MacIntyre himself has gone back to Aristotle for answers and from there to Aquinas. Perhaps we will see a more general rehabilitation of metaphysics such that it may again take its rightful place. If Gilson is right with his general thesis, only then can we hope to see real philosophy being taught in the universities and forming the basis of a widely accepted moral code. The alternative is not promising. History suggests that when 'anything goes', it usually does—with disastrous consequences.

HENRY VAUGHAN AND HIS POETRY

Incised in stone above the west door *of* the little Gothic church at Staunton Harold, Leicestershire, is the following inscription:

In the yeare 1653
When all things Sacred were throughout ye nation
Either demolisht or profaned
Sir Robert Shirley, Barronet,
Founded this church;
Whose singular praise it is,
To have done the best things in ye worst times,
and
Hoped them in the most callamitous

The righteous shall be had in everlasting remembrance.

We are told that Sir Robert Shirley, a Royalist, had refused to assist Cromwell. He was sent to the Tower and died there, aged twenty-seven. These were strife-torn times. The Civil War had ended in victory for the Parliamentarian cause in 1646 and the Monarchy did not return until 1660. It was during those same strife-torn times that Henry Vaughan "The Silurist" wrote his most memorable poetry and it might be said of him, also, that he had done the best things in the worst times. Vaughan, a Welshman, was born in Breconshire at Newton-upon-Usk in 1621 and died in 1695, not far from his birthplace. The Civil War was to have a very important influence on both the man and his poetry.

Today, Vaughan is chiefly remembered as one of the so-called 'metaphysical poets' of the 17th C. The other important members of the group are Donne, Crashaw, Cowley, Herbert, Marvell, and Traherne. The term 'metaphysical' seems to have been invented by John Dryden but was made famous by Dr Johnson who first used it to describe a type of poetry employing unusual and paradoxical images, relying on intellectual wit and upon learned imagery and subtle argument. For Johnson, it was meant as a pejorative term:

> Their thoughts are often new, but seldom natural; they are not obvious, but neither are they just; and the reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found. (*Lives of the Poets*: Cowley)

Such a judgement from an 18th C critic is hardly surprising. In an age that placed all of its hope on human reason and Baconian science, the highly imaginative poetry of the preceding century was largely dismissed as a 'conceit'. Indeed, even in Henry Vaughan's own times, allegorical habits of mind were being replaced by more realistic ones (Bacon published his *Novum Organum* the year before Henry Vaughan was born) and, in this sense, Vaughan's poetry looks back towards the Middle Ages rather than to his own times. Fortunately both literary tastes and philosophical opinions were to change again in later times. In the early 20th C, both Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were to discover deep affinities with the 'metaphysicals' and today, their poetry is well represented in most anthologies of English verse. It was in his essay on the metaphysical poets (1921) that Eliot made his now famous suggestion of a "dissociation of sensibility" that marked the end of what we might call the metaphysical style. The basis of this style, Eliot thought, was the poet's ability to constantly amalgamate disparate experiences to form new wholes. The metaphysical poet "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience". It is with Milton and Dryden—those giants of the 17th Century—Eliot suggests, that we see this "dissociation of sensibility" come to the fore and to manifest itself in the work of later poets such as Collins, Gray, Goldsmith and the great Dr Johnson himself. The language of these poets may have become more refined, but (so Eliot thought) the feeling became more crude.

As so it was that, after more than two centuries of virtual obscurity, the poetry of Henry Vaughan came to be valued again. Between 1679 and 1847, there was no new edition of Vaughan although one of his poems had been anthologized as early as 1803. But, if influential modern critics like Eliot and Pound had some hand in restoring the fortunes of the 'metaphysicals', so much more so did the *Zeitgeist*—by the time Eliot died (1965) the bankruptcy of positivism was clearly in evidence. Given that Edmund Blunden had written on Vaughan in 1927 and Siegfried Sassoon had visited Vaughan's grave and penned a sonnet on that visit in 1928, we might regard these poets as early prophets who, in the wake of the Great War, perhaps foresaw a re-emergence of interest in the imaginative and allegorical as a sort of counter reaction to the Slough of Despond which had developed out of the hell of Flanders. One might see the emergence of a wider and more general interest in Blake's poetry in the same light, although W.B.Yeats and Edwin Ellis first edited Blake's work in 1891-3.

Insofar as the poet himself is concerned, as distinct from the poetry, we owe the resurrection of Henry Vaughan in large part to two grand ladies of literary leanings, the Misses Louise Guiney and Gwenllian Morgan. Miss Morgan was a

'local', so to speak, and lived most of her long life in Breconshire, dying there in 1939 in her 88th year. The daughter of a local pastor, she was a keen historian and intensely interested in Vaughan. [8] She was also the first woman in Wales to serve the office of mayor. Miss Guiney, by contrast, was an American Catholic, with no close connection to Wales. She was, nonetheless, an ardent Anglophile, with a particular love for the Royalist poets and a sympathy for the Royalist cause. Morgan and Guiney gathered together what scant information we have today concerning the life of Henry Vaughan. Unfortunately, both these ladies died before they were able to publish their biography of Vaughan. That task was taken up by F.E. Hutchinson, an Anglican Divine and one-time chaplain of Kings College, who published his account (heavily reliant on Morgan and Guiney's researches) in 1947.[9] One other biography has appeared since then, that of Stevie Davies in 1995.[10] Her account, though, introduces no new material and is largely concerned with a personal appreciation of the poet.

It is perhaps something of a blessing that we know relatively little about Vaughan the man for this has largely spared us those usual, weighty volumes where the minutiae of daily life is drawn into interminable discussion regarding 'influences' on poetic production. We have no images of him, no descriptions of his personality and only a fairly sketchy record of his time on this earth. Even so, I note that Stevie Davies has a whole chapter ("The Crucible of Twinship") where an elaborate superstructure of critical analysis and comment rests on the scant knowledge we have of the relationship between Henry Vaughan and his twin brother, Thomas.

Of Vaughan's early life we know virtually nothing save that he and his twin brother were taught at a nearby school by one Matthew Herbert, an Anglican clergyman. Later, Henry Vaughan may have attended Oxford University

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[8] Such intensity of feeling some 250 years later may seem a little odd, but is by no means unique. I am indebted to John Julius Norwich for the following pieces which appeared consecutively in the *In Memoriam* column of *The Times* in London On 3rd Sept., 1969 (overleaf)

> OLIVER CROMWELL, 25th April, 1599 — 3rd September 1658. Lord Protector, 1653-1658. Statesman, General and Ruler.
> 'Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered'. Psalm 68, verse i.
> In honoured remembrance.
>
> CROMWELL. — To the eternal condemnation of Oliver, Seditionist, Traitor, Regicide, Racialist, proto-Fascist and blasphemous Bigot. God save England from his like. — Hugo Ball.

[9] *Henry Vaughan: A Life and Interpretation*, Oxford Univ. Press, London, 1947. 260pp

[10] *Henry Vaughan*, Seren (Poetry Wales Press), Border Lines Series, Bridgend, Wales, 1995. 213pp.

although the records establish only that his twin brother did. Whatever the case, he certainly went to London and seems to have studied law for a period. With the outbreak of the Civil War, he returned home and there, for a short time, was secretary to Sir Marmaduke Lloyd, chief justice of the sessions. We know that Vaughan was married to Catherine Wise by 1646 and that the couple had four children. Catherine appears to have died very young, almost certainly within a decade of the marriage. Vaughan married again, probably around 1655. His second wife, Elizabeth, was his former wife's sister and she too, bore him four children.

The question whether Henry Vaughan bore arms in the Civil War has been much discussed. Hutchinson is of the view that Henry did take up arms for the Royalists but Vaughan's first modern editor, H.F. Lyte (1847) takes an opposite view. Whatever the truth of the matter, there can be no doubt that the defeat of the Royalists, together with the death of his younger brother, William (in 1648), had a profound effect on Vaughan. This is evidenced by the sudden change in both the nature and the quality of the poetry he wrote.

As to his profession in later adult life, there are indications that he may have been a doctor but there is little evidence of any training in this field. In a letter to John Aubrey in 1673, Vaughan talks about his brother, Thomas, and then says: "My profession also is physic which I have practised now for many years with good success". Earlier (1640s), Vaughan was probably employed as a secretary to Judge Lloyd (and soon after, Hutchinson surmises, as a soldier).

With this brief biography serving as a sort of introduction, we come now to a consideration of Vaughan's literary output. His first volume of poetry, *Poems with the Tenth Satire of Juvenal Englished*, was published in 1646. A second volume, entitled *Olor Iscanus* (Swan of the Usk) appears to have been completed by 1647, but was not published until 1651. It is in this second volume that Vaughan gives himself the title of "Silurist"—a reference to the ancient tribe, the Silures, which inhabited the south-east of Wales and which was mentioned by Tacitus as having caused the invading Romans a good deal of trouble. I assume that the Silures also gave us the geological term 'Silurian'.

Of the bulk of these early poems, perhaps the less said the better.
They are largely very conventional, secular poems, often imitating earlier poets such as Habington or Randolph. I think it fair to say that if Vaughan's reputation rested on these alone, he would be largely forgotten today. The first volume includes a number of love poems, almost all of which are addressed to *Amoret*, a sort of generic title for the female subject. Here, Vaughan follows earlier poets such as Lovelace, Browne, Lodge and Waller. Nonetheless, some of the poetry is

memorable. Here, for instance, is a little vignette of the London of Vaughan's student days:

> Should we go now a wandering, we should meet
> With catchpoles, whores, & carts in every street:
> Now when each narrow lane, each nook & cave,
> Sign-posts, & shop-doors, pimp for every knave,
> When riotous sinful plush, and tell-tale spurs
> Walk Fleet street, & the Strand, when the soft stirs
> Of bawdy, ruffled silks, turn night to day;
> And the loud whip, and coach scolds all the way;
> When lusts of all sorts, and each itchy blood
> From the Tower-wharf to Cymbeline, and Lud,
> Hunts for a mate, and the tired footman reels
> 'Twixt chair-men, torches, & the hackney wheels:
> *(A Rhapsody, lines 35-46)*

Here is a picture of the seamier side of London, with that sort of eye for all the sordid detail which we might expect of Hogarth or Dickens. The phrases "riotous sinful plush" and "bawdy, ruffled silks" are particularly well contrived and serve as good examples of the metaphysical style.

The second volume of Vaughan's poetry is somewhat more adventuresome and treats a wide range of themes. It includes translations of Ovid, Ausonius, Boethius and Casimir. Looking at the index in Alan Rudrum's splendidly annotated edition of Vaughan's poems[11], one cannot help but notice how the lengthy titles, often overweighed with effusive praise of their respective human subjects, contrast with the short, pithy titles of the later religious poetry (and, indeed, many of the religious poems are untitled). Thus we find, for instance:

> *To the Truly Noble, and Most Excellently Accomplished, the Lord Kildare Digby*

and

> *An Elegy on the Death of Mr R.W. Slain in the Late Unfortunate Differences at Rowton Heath, near Chester, 1645*

One has the impression that the poem has, in each case, occasioned less literary effort than the title! For my own part, when I read these titles, I cannot help but compare them to the equally ponderous titles so beloved of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood for their paintings. My second example from Vaughan, for instance, bears comparison with Holman Hunt:

> *Rienzi Vowing to Obtain Justice for the Death of his Young Brother, Slain in a Skirmish between the Colonna and Orsini Factions.*

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[11] *Henry Vaughan, The Complete Poems*, Penguin Books, London, 1983, Revised Edition. 718pp. All extracts of poems quoted in this essay come from Rudrum's Edition.

But, perhaps in *Olor Iscanus,* we should particularly note Vaughan's choice in translating Ovid, Ausonius, Boethius and Casimir. If, as some commentators suspect, Vaughan translated his selections in the order given here, then we see a gradual progression towards more serious philosophical and religious themes. Casimir (Mathias Casimir Sarbiewski) was a Polish Jesuit whose poetry often addressed religious themes. We might also expect that, in his reading of Ausonius, Vaughan would have learned of Paulinus of Nola at this time. Later (1654), Vaughan was to publish a rather free translation of the *Life of Paulinus* (from Rosweyde).

As I foreshadowed earlier in this essay, the events associated with the Civil War, combined with the death of his younger brother were to have a profound effect on Vaughan and his poetry. Other commentators have also suggested that Vaughan himself may have endured some serious illness at about this time and that such illness brought the fact of human mortality sharply into focus. As Dr Johnson once said, "The prospect of being hanged in a fortnight wonderfully concentrates the mind"! Irrespective of which of these influences assumed the most importance in the mind of the poet, what we see in the poems of his 1650 edition, titled *Silex Scintillans*, is a virtual transformation. Even if Vaughan's earlier acquaintance with the work of Casimir (and, perhaps, other and earlier Christian writers) is taken into account, there is nothing to prepare the reader for what F.E. Hutchinson calls the "heightened feeling and majestic utterance" that we get in so many of the poems of *Silex Scintillans*.

From a lovesick, young gallant who pens his rather conventional, foppish, and formulaic verses to *Amoret*, we come to this:

> I saw Eternity the other night
> Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,
> All calm, as it was bright,
> And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
> Driven by the spheres
> Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the world
> And all her train were hurl'd.
> *(The World)*

Hutchinson is in no two minds about what has happened to the poet. He refers to it as a conversion. This, I think, is a little too dramatic. There can be no question regarding the sudden new direction in Vaughan's poetry, but he was always a believing Christian. He was not converted to Christianity, but simply lifted to a higher plane of spiritual understanding. This is very obvious when one considers the subject matter of his religious poetry. Alan Rudrum's notes to the

Silex Scintillans poems run to well over 100 pages of tight text. The vast majority of the references are biblical ones and we can only conclude that Vaughan had a prodigious knowledge of the bible. Such knowledge does not come abruptly with conversion but is the fruit of years and years of reading. The raw materials were surely latent in Vaughan and, as he himself says in his introduction to the first *Silex Scintillans* volume, what ignited his poetic imagination was the divine flash of the Spirit on a reluctant and hardened heart:

> You have attempted many times, I admit, to capture me without injury, and your voice, haunting me, has endeavored without words to make me heedful. A more divine breath has entreated me with its gentle action and admonished me in vain with its holy murmur. I was flint—deaf and silent ... You draw nearer and break that mass which is my rocky heart, and that which was formerly stone is now made flesh. See how it is torn, its fragments at last setting your heavens alight ...[12]

These fiery sparks from the heart constitute the best of Vaughan's poetry. In poem after poem of the *Silex Scintillans* collections (1650 and 1655), we have that direct evidence of a man who:

> ... felt through all this fleshly dress
> Bright shoots of everlastingness.
> *(The Retreat)*

Space will not permit me to reproduce the best of these poems in their entirety, but a few short extracts may serve to give something of the flavour for those who are not familiar with Vaughan's poetry:

> When first I saw true beauty, and thy joys
> Active as light, and calm without all noise
> (*Mount of Olives*, II)

> They are all gone into the world of light!
> And I alone sit lingering here
> ('*They are all gone into the world of light*!')

> The unthrift Sun shot vital gold
> A thousand pieces
> (*Regeneration*)

> Man is the shuttle, to whose winding quest
> And passage through these looms
> God ordered motion, but ordained no rest
> (*Man*)

> This dew fell on my breast;
> O how it bloods,

[12] Here I use part of the translation by Alan Rudrum of Vaughan's Latin original.

And spirits all my earth!
(*The Morning-Watch*)

My soul, there is a country
Far beyond the stars,
(*Peace*)

The themes treated by Vaughan in these poems have been the subject of much scholarly questioning over the last eighty years or so. To what extent was Vaughan influenced by the Hermetic Philosophy? To what extent was he influenced by Platonism? Was Vaughan a true mystic and, if so, did he follow the *via negativa* or the *via positiva*? Was Vaughan a true 'nature poet' in the sense of being a precursor to the English Romantic poets? Here, I cannot attempt to deal in any detail with all of these 'problems' which the critics see in Vaughan's religious poetry. However, a few general comments might help to resolve some of these supposed difficulties or, at least, put them into some sort of perspective.

In the first place, it is absolutely clear that Henry Vaughan is a Christian traditionalist in his religious outlook. This is not to suppose that he does not bring in ideas from the Platonists and Neoplatonists, or from Hermeticism, but rather, that he assimilates such ideas within a thoroughly traditional, Christian framework. If Vaughan's Christianity appears a little unorthodox, it is perhaps because he is a man out of his time—his religion often tends to look back toward what he saw as more primitive but purer expressions of Christianity. We need to remember that the Civil War cast Vaughan adrift from his traditional church environment and he was forced to find his own expression of Christianity. In so doing, he borrowed freely from many traditions, both within pre-Civil War Anglicanism and further afield. The religious poetry of George Herbert, for instance, was to exert an enormous influence upon Vaughan and he freely acknowledges his debt to Herbert in some of his poems.

With regard to Platonic influences, many possible correlates present themselves in the poetry. The first is the theme of childhood. In what is probably Vaughan's most famous poem, *The Retreat*, he begins:

Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my Angel-infancy.

Here is the clear notion, not only of childhood innocence, but also of childhood understanding and acceptance of the spiritual realm. This theme appears in many of Vaughan's poems. It is tempting to suppose that Vaughan alludes to the Platonic notion of anamnesis and pre-existence and, indeed, that may have been an influence upon him. We ought to remember, though, that Vaughan was a man who knew his bible backwards and it is more likely that he had in mind that injunction in *Matthew* 18.3: "Verily I say unto you, Except ye

be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven". (KJV)

Another clear debt to Platonism comes from Vaughan's notion of a cosmos of spheres or rings with ordered motion and we tend to immediately associate this with Plato. One peculiarity of Vaughan in this respect is his association of ordered motion with silence. Time after time we get that notion of the profound beauty of silence. When he saw eternity (*The World*, I) it was:

> All calm, as it was bright

Of the stars (*The Constellation*), he says:

> Fair, ordered lights (whose motion without noise
> Resembles those true joys

And, perhaps his most beautiful depiction of the Platonic Beauty (*Mount of Olives* II):

> When first I saw true beauty, and thy joys
> Active as light, and calm without all noise

There are, of course, other echoes of Platonism or Neo-Platonism in Vaughan's poetry but, very often, they have come down to him from that earlier Christian tradition drawing upon the Augustinian world-picture. The idea of this world as an imperfect image of the real world leads naturally to the concept of *contemptus mundi*, implicit in Augustine and so evident in much of Vaughan's work. Indeed, Vaughan's translation of the *De Contemptu Mundi* of St Eucherius of Lyon (5th C) is, as far as this writer is aware, the only English translation of the work. But it would be wrong to suppose that Vaughan or, for that matter, Augustine, regarded matter as evil or deprecated the created order. Quite the reverse in Vaughan's case. He saw all plants and animals as responding to the Divine and even lifeless stones paid a sort of tribute to their Maker ("By some hid sense their Maker gave").

Vaughan's association with the Hermetic philosophy is based upon certain direct evidence in the poems themselves as well as the fact that his twin brother, Thomas, delved into alchemy and was well acquainted with the writings attributed to "Thrice-Great Hermes". In his published work, Thomas also quotes from Paracelsus, Robert Fludd and Cornelius Agrippa. Nonetheless, Thomas saw himself as "neither Papist nor Sectary but a true, resolute Protestant in the best sense of the Church of England". Despite these assertions by Thomas, his writings on alchemy do suggest a more erratic and headstrong approach to the subject matter than his brother, Henry who, as Hutchinson says:

> passed the Hermetic ideas and terms so integrally into the common language of Christian tradition that they do not disconcert the reader; they are not resented as the technical terms of an unfamiliar way of expressing his conviction of the 'commerce' between heaven and earth.

Other authors, though, believe that Hermetic influences are much more important in Henry Vaughan's work than that assumed by a simple borrowing of Hermetic terms to illustrate or flesh out an otherwise conventional, Christian understanding. Miss Elizabeth Holmes devoted a whole book to the subject and it has been discussed by many other commentators.[13] And yet, Vaughan's supposed Hermeticism is very difficult to pin down. It appears as only scattered references throughout the corpus of his work and, in the end, one tends to agree with Ross Garner who says (of Vaughan's supposed Hermeticism):

> Vaughan does not make out of God a scientific principle, an adjunct of matter by which it may be governed. He takes explanations of the physical universe of which he is aware and uses them parabolically to adumbrate Christian doctrine.[14]

And so, while we may come across references to Hermetic terms such as signatures, rays, beams, sympathies, magnets, and so on, these are terms which Vaughan assimilates effortlessly into his Christianity.

For all that, the words that crop up most frequently in Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans* poems are biblical words—shoots, buds, dew, doves, stones, roses, light, to mention but a few of his favourite themes. There can be little doubt that Vaughan's main source is the bible and that other influences are secondary by comparison. But the word white, so often used by Vaughan as an epithet for that he holds in high regard (e.g. "white, celestial thought" in *The Retreat*), is probably not of biblical origin and deserves special mention. Hutchinson points out that the Welsh counterpart, *gwyn* signifies not only white but fair, happy, holy, blessed. "There is", he says "no more frequent epithet in Welsh poetry". As an example, he goes on to point out that the Welsh word for Paradise is *gwynfyd*—literally 'white world'.

The question of Vaughan's mysticism is also problematical. Often, you will see Vaughan (and Traherne for that matter) described in anthologies of English poetry as "a Seventeenth century mystic". It is not that easy, for there are mystics and mystics. If we are talking of a person who has achieved a full unity with the Divine—a man, as it were, living wholly in another world—then Vaughan was not a mystic. For one thing, there are practical considerations which are not lost on Stevie Davies in her account of Vaughan's life. She wonders (and so do I) how someone with eight children by two marriages manages to get enough quiet time to meditate at all! Most of Vaughan's important religious poetry was written before he was thirty-five years old and between his twenty-fifth and thirty-fifth

[13] *Henry Vaughan and the Hermetic Philosophy*, Oxford, 1932.
[14] *Henry Vaughan: Experience and the Tradition*, Univ. Chicago Press, 1959.

year, four children were born into the Vaughan household. The house would have been a fairly lively place, certainly no eremite's cell. Moreover, either as a secretary or a doctor, we assume that Vaughan had to earn a crust. Mind you, J.S. Bach was in the same boat, but I note that no less a critic than H.C. Robbins-Landon has described him as being "in many respects a genuine mystic".[15]

More likely, I think, is Ross Garner's appraisal. In discussing one of Vaughan's better known 'mystical' poems, *The Night*, he supposes that what characterises Vaughan's religious experience is that of a longing for mystical union, not its achievement. And yet, when we read his great religious poems, is it not the case that we, ourselves, feel as if Vaughan has achieved some sort of mystical union. That this should be so is the mark of great poetry. Now, it is interesting to note that T.S. Eliot[16] supposes Vaughan to be a "minor religious poet" precisely because his poetry is the product of "a special religious awareness, which may exist without the general awareness which we expect of the major poet". In other words, Vaughan's poetry is simply 'devotional poetry'—like say, Helen Steiner Rice. But this is surely not true! Some of his religious poetry is of this type no doubt and Hutchison refers to certain of it as "plodding couplets of conventional piety". But most is far more universal in its appeal. Vaughan, of all people, is a generalist, not a specialist. He lived at a time when the particular symbols and practices associated with his form of Anglicanism were shattered by the Civil War. As Kathleen Raine reminds us: "Iconoclastic Protestantism largely destroyed, in England, the images which always had been, and must normally be, the natural language of spiritual knowledge".[17] For this reason, if for no other, he was inclined to draw his inspiration from wider sources and, most especially, from the natural world around him. But Vaughan's nature was not Wordsworth's nature. It was at the same time a reflection of the Divine and a veil, obscuring the Divine. Vaughan, I think, would have agreed with William Blake—"Mr Wordsworth must know that what he Writes Valuable is not to be found in Nature".

It is true that there are many enigmas in Vaughan's poetry, but I suspect these are of our making, not his. Vaughan can appear to hold the things of this earth in contempt, yet regard them as hierophantic. At some times, his poetry hints at an immanent spirituality, at others, a transcendent spirituality. His poetry can appear very simple yet, upon closer study, it reflects all of the complexities inherent in the Christian tradition. But it is the mark of a truly imaginative spirit that such

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[15] *Handel and his World*, Flamingo (Harper Collins), London, 1992. Pg. 285

[16] "Religion and Literature" in: *T.S. Eliot. Selected Essays*, Faber & Faber, 1972, (3rd edit).

[17] *Defending Ancient Springs*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1985, Pg.118

contraries can be held together without conflict. Vaughan's best poetry transcends such concerns and draws upon a world of the imagination which is outside time and outside history. No one has put it better than Raine:

> Those who look to a timeless world are least likely to fall into archaisms of style, for the world of imagination is outside history altogether. Pope, Dryden and Auden are dated in a way that Dante, Milton, Coleridge, and Yeats, even when these embody in their imaginative world themes from history, can never be.[18]

I think I would be tempted to add to these two lists given by Raine. To the first list of Pope, Dryden, and Auden, I would add Eliot. To the second list, I would add Vaughan. *The Waste Land* may well reflect a modern, fragmented mind at the end of its tether and it may well be the best poem of the last hundred years (as some think it is). But it can only have meaning in an age as terrible as ours. Vaughan's best poems, on the other hand, are outside the context of history and they supply an intellectual nourishment of real substance, not the sort of literary Bovril so lauded by many modern critics. They are, in all truth "bright shoots of everlastingness".

[18] *Defending Ancient Springs*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1985, Pg 122.

BACH MEETS PROCRUSTES

On Bach's Motivation for Composing the Church Cantatas and Passions

Procrustes was a very nasty piece of work who ran an early 'Bed and Breakfast' establishment in the days of Theseus. In fact, Theseus dealt with him as a sort of curtain raiser for his Minotaur fight. What made Procrustes so nasty was the manner in which he prepared his guest for his or her bed (not the other way around). If the guest was too long for the bed, overhanging bits would be lopped off; if too short, the guest would be stretched to fit. There are many other procrustean figures about today who deal with arguments in this way—they will either stretch them beyond endurance or simply lop off any awkward facts that overhang their particular philosophical bed. I fear that some of the commentary on the works of J.S. Bach may have suffered such treatment in recent times.

Now I want to begin my discussion with a *caveat*, lest the unsuspecting reader thinks that I am some sort of musicologist. In fact, I am an agriculturist by training and a rabbit poisoner (retired) by trade. I cannot read music; neither can I play a musical instrument. In short, I know nothing about music, but I like the sound that some of it makes. I particularly like the sound that J.S. Bach's music makes, and none more so than the sound of the Cantatas. I have, over the past few months, done some casual reading about Bach and his Cantata music and it is here that I believe I encountered the giant Procrustes. [19]

Amongst my admittedly limited forays into the prodigious literature pertaining to Bach was a most interesting site on the Internet simply called the J.S. Bach home page. For those interested, it can be found at *http://www.jsbach.org/*. This worthy enterprise has been put together by two Bach lovers, Jan Hanford in North America and Jan Koster in Europe. They deserve much praise for their

[19] My main sources are as follows:
Terry, C.S., *Johann Sebastian Bach*, Oxford University Press, London,1933 (2nd Ed)
Schweitzer, A., *J.S. Bach* (English Translation in two volumes by Ernest Newman), Dover Publications, N.Y., 1911
Grew, E.M. & Grew, S., *Bach*, J.M. Dent & Sons, London, 1947
Spitta, Phillip, 1889, *Johann Sebastian Bach. His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685-1750*. (Engl. Transl. by Clara Bell & J.A. Fuller-Maitland), Dover Publications, N.Y., 1992
Forkel, J.N. 1802, *Johann Sebastian Bach. His Life, Art, and Work*. Transl. with notes & appendices by C.S. Terry, Da Capo Press, NY, 1970.

labours because all of it has been put together at no cost to you or me, and it is a most useful resource. You will find there lists of Bach's works, a huge bibliography on Bach (there are hundreds of quoted sources for general information on Bach plus hundreds of more specialised references) and his music, comments of particular recordings and even some MIDI sequences featuring snippets of Bach's music. The site has won many awards and has gained many acknowledgments.

I feel almost ashamed to look such a gift-horse in the mouth, but I have to say that in the matter of explaining the motivation behind Bach's creation of the music for the Church Cantatas, I cannot agree with Jan Koster who wants me to believe that Bach wrote solely for his pocket and his ego rather than for his God. I think Jan Koster is guilty of applying the Procrustes Principle in this matter. He feels that any suggestion of religious sentiments in the composition of the Cantatas does not fit the modern, post-Christian philosophical bed, so he lops off some of the facts and stretches others. You might suppose that all of this is a storm in a teacup and that Koster is just another cyberfreak expressing his unsolicited views on a very accessible forum, where academic merit matters less than the ability to access the Internet. Not so! Koster is an academic of some standing. He is Professor of Linguistics at the Rijksuniversiteit, Groningen, in the Netherlands. He is clearly an expert in his field of linguistics and has produced many papers on the subject. Whether he can read Bach's mind is another matter!

Now, I am not supposing that Bach was a saintly man, or that he was above the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil. Indeed, there is any amount of historical evidence on hand to show that Bach was, at times, a most unchristian fellow. For instance, while he was *Kapellmeister* at Leipzig, he often flouted the rules of his employment agreement and showed a great deal of insolence. He allowed his stepmother to die in poverty.[20] He argued with a great many people and even came to blows with one of his contemporaries, Geyersbach, after having applied an "injurious epithet" to him.[21] His shortcomings, in fact, were manifold. However, it does not necessarily follow that he could not, at times, be moved by religious sentiments when composing some of his sacred works. Indeed, all the evidence that I could find in the standard texts on J.S. Bach suggests that he was so moved and that this depth of feeling for his subject matter was in no small way responsible for the undeniable beauty of his music.

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[20] Schweitzer (*opp cit*). Vol. 1, pg. 160.
[21] *Ibid*, pg. 102.

But this is precisely what Koster denies—he believes that, because Bach was, at times, very unchristian in his behavior, we should therefore, not suppose that he was otherwise inclined when he wrote his sacred works. Let me quote a few examples from Koster's account in an attempt to expose the Procrustes Principle. *1. "Since Hildesheimer's biography of Mozart, we are used to the idea that heavenly* (I assume Koster here means "religious") *music can be written by human beings with rather earthly concerns. From Mozart's correspondence, the undeniable fact emerges that he was often occupied with a somewhat infantile anal eroticism. Like Mozart, Bach was not a saint at all. In a very earthly way, he was much concerned with money and social status..."* This is a variant of the old principle of guilt by association—Mozart was preoccupied with anal eroticism (was he?) and Bach is like Mozart. Moreover, Koster would have us believe that because Bach was "much concerned with money and social status", he could not be 'religious' at times. This is nonsense. While it is true that he was concerned with money and status (after all, he had rather a large household to support), he also exhibited much benevolence on occasions. As for his religiosity, we might recall that many of his scores were garnished with the letters S.D.G. (*Soli Deo Gloria*—"to God alone be praise") or J.J. (*Jesu juva*—"Help me, Jesus!") and that he adorned the *Orgelbuchlein* with the dictum (here translated) "For the glory of the most high God, and for the instruction of my neighbour." Similar sentiments were expressed in the *Klavierbuchlein* given to his eldest son, Friedemann. These actions earned him no extra money or fame—they were clearly from the heart.

Shortly before his death, Bach composed an organ chorale and directed that it be titled "*Before Thy Throne with this I Come*". Spitta recounts that a young theologian friend of Bach's, one Johann Michael Schmidt, was moved to remark of this final action that "all that the advocates of materialism could bring forward must collapse before this one example".[22] When Bach died, an inventory of his possessions indicated that his library was largely comprised of religious works—some eighty theological books. Charles Sandford Terry[23] suggests that Bach's library catalogue "declares its owner a student of theology, a stout disciple of Luther, and a man of sincere religious feeling".

2. "*After his appointment as Konzertmeister in 1714, his office seems to require a regular cantata production of one per month. When Bach hopes to succeed Kapellmeister Johann Samuel Drese, he intensifies his cantata production but he*

[22] Spitta (*opp cit*), vol.3, pg 275.
[23] Terry (*opp cit*), pg. 276.

simply stops writing cantatas altogether when it becomes clear that he will be passed by for the function! So much for writing cantatas to the honour of God." This little extract, to quote Artemus Ward, is "rote sarcasticul". The point here, surely, is that the task of producing cantatas was no longer part of his official duties—the job had been given to Drese's son—and it is likely that the new *Kapellmeister* resumed the full obligations of the post in November 1716. Does Koster expect Bach to compete with Drese as an unpaid extra? In any case, who is to say that Bach's only avenue to praise God was through the cantatas?

3. *"In Köthen (1717-1723) Bach's office does not require regular cantata production. This does not seem to have frustrated Bach at all, because he always maintained later on that this was the happiest period of his life. Hardly the opinion of an arch-cantor, in other words".* This is an extraordinary claim. In effect, it equates happiness to religiosity or, at least, to the composition of religious works. It implies that if Bach was able to find happiness in composing works other than cantatas, this proves that the did not regard cantata production as a source of happiness. The deepest religious feelings we may have are not necessarily associated with happiness .

4. *"During these early Leipzig years Bach…produced…the St Matthew Passion, (1729, in recent times on little evidence pushed back to 1727, to escape the for some people unbearable conclusion that ten key sections of the 'pinnacle of religiously inspired music' were parodies of a Trauermusik for Leopold von Anhalt-Köthen)…"* The *Trauer-Music* episode has here been cunningly twisted to suggest that Bach felt so little for the *St Matthew Passion* that he simply lifted some earlier pieces of funerary music and made them do duty in the *Passion*. In fact, his work on the *St Matthew Passion* was already in progress when Leopold died and, given the understandable urgency involved in preparing the funeral music, Bach decided to use some of the *St Matthew Passion* music in the *Trauer-Music*. It is true that the funeral ceremonies for the Prince, who died in mid Nov. 1728, did not take place until sometime in the following year, but this does not detract from the general idea of urgency related to the composition of the funeral music. Thus, the particular sections of the *St Matthew Passion* mentioned by Koster are not "parodies" of the *Trauer-Music*—it is the other way round. Indeed, Schweitzer[24] remarks of this business "It is almost incredible that the Bach who had written the *St Matthew Passion* is the same Bach who took this music,

[24] Schweitzer (*opp cit*),Vol. 2, page 209.

with all it expresses, and parodied it so grievously". On the same note, Terry[25] says "The conjecture that Bach borrowed from it [The *Trauer-Music*] to complete the *Passion* cannot be entertained*"*. Spitta[26] is also convinced that the *Trauer-Music* contains pieces from the *St Matthew Passion* and not vice-versa: "It has of late been made extremely probable that this work, which has for some time been lost, was for the most part made up of portions of the then newly composed *St Matthew Passion*. Here, accordingly, the same relations subsist between the two works as between the *Trauerode* of 1727 and the *St Mark Passion*: only in this case the church composition was certainly the older of the two."

It is, of course, true that Bach often borrowed freely from his secular works in composing sacred works, but this does not necessarily point to any lack of reverence on Bach's part. More than likely, if Bach felt that a particular composition or extract from his secular works was particularly suited to the religious theme under consideration, he would use it. This hardly equates to indifference or downright disrespect for the subject matter. We should not expect that all genius in Bach's composition is always associated with an overtly religious theme. Neither should we assume that borrowing the secular to praise the sacred is an indictment of motive. In fact, the word parody should not be used to describe Bach's borrowings. The primary definition of parody in the OED is "Composition in which an author's characteristics are humorously imitated; feeble imitation, travesty". Victor Borge might produce parodies of Bach, but Bach does not produce parodies of his own music.

★ ★ ★ ★

The above examples from Jan Koster's dissertation are but a small part of a more generalised attack on the idea of religiosity (and specifically, the Christian religion) in sacred works from the Baroque period. It is his thesis that the central concern of the Baroque composer is "the objectively conceived Affekten (passions), such as elementary wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness and their various composites". No doubt, there is truth in the claim that Bach used conventional means to achieve moods or "passions" in his work. Schweitzer has expounded on the general techniques used to convey the various 'motives' such as joy, sadness, tumult, exhaustion, terror, and so on. But this is not to suggest that Bach simply approached the writing of his cantata music in some entirely mechanical way. Even Koster has to admit that "In spite of the supposedly objective character

[25] Terry, C.S. 1933. The Music of Bach: An Introduction (1963 ed). Dover publications NY, Page 77.
[26] Spitta, (*opp cit*), Vol. 2, Pg. 619.

of Baroque music, it appears that Bach is more inspired by certain texts than by others. He is always much inspired by texts evoking ...the moment of dying and the coming union with Christ". Inspired by what precisely if not by a deep religious conviction? Koster suggests that the inspiration is a form of mysticism of the kind stressed by the Pietists in Bach's days. However, the authors that I have consulted, expressly state that Bach was opposed to Pietism as then practiced, and was a strictly orthodox Lutheran.[27] Koster further argues that "the mysticism of Bach was not an orthodox Christian idea at all, but a variant of mysticism that can be found in all cultures and all times". This, of course, is a convenient escape hatch for those who admire the music of Bach but cannot bear to think that he may have been inspired by expressly Christian ideas. Koster seems to have got the thing the wrong way around. It is demonstrably true that Bach's music can profoundly move those individuals who do not share his religious beliefs, but we do not have to deny Bach such beliefs in order to sit more comfortably with the idea. Indeed, an understanding of Bach's intimacy with, and belief in his subject matter ought to heighten our appreciation of his sacred music. We do not have to be Christians to do this.

[27] See especially, Spitta (*opp cit*), Vol. 1., pgs 358-364, on this point.

"ONE WORD OF TRUTH SHALL OUTWEIGH THE WHOLE WORLD"

Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn 1918—2008

> Shukov went off to sleep, and he was completely content. Fate had been kind to him in many ways that day: he hadn't been put in the cells, the gang hadn't been sent to the Socialist Community Centre, he'd fiddled himself an extra bowl of porridge for dinner, the gang leader had fixed a good percentage, he'd been happy building that wall, he'd slipped through the search with that bit of blade, he'd earned himself something from Tsesar in the evening, he'd bought his tobacco. And he hadn't fallen ill—he had overcome his sickness of the morning.
> The day had gone by without a single cloud—almost a happy day.
> There were three thousand six hundred and fifty three days in his sentence, from reveille to lights out.
> The three extra days were because of the leap years…

Thus ends the work for which Solzhenitsyn is perhaps best known—*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*. If any book vindicates the old adage about the pen being mightier than the sword, this book does. As an autobiographical novel, it brought the Soviet gulag camps to the attention of the West and, indeed, to the attention of people in Soviet Russia. Its publication, allowed by Nikita Khrushchev, was a miracle in itself. Later, of course, the full horror of the camps would be revealed in Solzhenitzyn's huge work, *The Gulag Archipeligo*. Like the fall of Rome, the fall of the Soviet regime may be attributed to many factors and, undeniably, one of those was the publication of Solzhenitsyn's books.

But of course, his writings are important not only as political and moral statements. Many of his books are great works of literature (*Denisovitch*, *First Circle*, *Cancer Ward*) and can be read purely as such. Even in translation, the prose style is enormously impressive. Such was the power of his writing in *The Gulag Archipeligo* I found myself unable to read more than a few pages at a sitting—it was simply too intense, too horrific to endure without seeking solace from somewhere else. On the first page of the first chapter he sets the scene:

> The universe has as many different centers as there are living beings in it. Each of us is a centre of the Universe and that Universe is shattered when they hiss at you "You are under arrest".

He then goes on to chronicle how thousands of such universes just like yours and mine were destroyed—slowly, deliberately, and with maximum suffering.

I have a friend who first read *Cancer Ward* in a biologist's hut on Macquarie Island almost forty years ago. The effect of the book was such, he tells me, that even today the various characters are seared into his memory like some 'read only' computer file which cannot be overwritten. In retrospect, it was not the sort of book to read in utter isolation at the end of the earth for the setting would only serve to amplify the anguish of the story.

It is difficult for us now to conceive of the courage shown by Solzhenitsyn in speaking out against the Stalinist Terror. It brings to mind a memorable line from André Malraux: "The sight of a man saying no with his bare hands is one of the things that most mysteriously and profoundly stirs the hearts of man". His courage is all the more remarkable given the particular nature of the Terror—best explained by the following fictional story concerning Stalin's death. On his deathbed Stalin calls for two of his Party faithful and explains that he wants to choose one of them as his successor. On the bedside table is a cage containing a canary. He instructs the first man to open the cage and take hold of the canary, being especially careful to see that it does not escape. The aspirant does so with such trepidation that he grips the bird too firmly and it expires. A disgusted Stalin calls for another canary and instructs the second aspirant to do the same. Fearful now that he may kill the bird, the second man holds it so lightly that it escapes and flies out the window. An enraged Stalin now calls for a third canary and says to the two disgraced aspirants; "this is how you hold a canary". He grasps the bird and proceeds to pluck out all its feathers, ignoring its cries of pain. The now naked bird, shivering from cold, huddles in his open palm for warmth. "See", said Stalin, "the bird is grateful for the warmth I give it and will not seek to leave because it needs me."

If you look at the photographs of Solzhenitsyn, the suffering of his fellow Zeks is all too obvious in his face. But there is dignity and defiance in the visage too. He had borne the grief of Mother Russia but was not about to rejoice when its cruel regime tumbled down. What came in its place was, for him, not much better. For he knew that there were many ways to kill the human spirit and a velvet glove could do it just as effectively as a mailed fist. You can kill a man simply by taking away his inspiration. They did it to his friend Tvardosky:

> There are many ways to kill a poet. For Tvardosky they chose taking away his creation, his passion—his magazine [*Novy Mir*]. The sixteen years of humiliations meekly borne by this noble knight were not enough. If only

> the magazine held out; if only literary tradition were not broken off; if only people were published; if only people read …

Of the art of writing and, indeed of all art, his views were unmistakably Platonic. There are such things as Beauty, Truth and Goodness. They are not subjective and, despite our efforts, cannot be permanently defiled. If Truth and Goodness are cut down, self-evident Beauty will eventually restore them:

> But a work of art bears within itself its own verification: conceptions which are devised or stretched do not stand being portrayed in images, they all come crashing down, appear sickly and pale, convince no one. But those works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force—they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them.
>
> So perhaps that ancient trinity of Truth, Goodness and Beauty is not simply an empty, faded formula as we thought in the days of our self-confident, materialistic youth? If the tops of these three trees converge, as the scholars maintained, but the too blatant, too direct stems of Truth and Goodness are crushed, cut down, not allowed through—then perhaps the fantastic, unpredictable, unexpected stems of Beauty will push through and soar to that very same place, and in so doing will fulfil the work of all three?
>
> (Nobel Prize Address, 1970).

The details of Solzhenitsyn's life were well covered by the news media and I would prefer here to concentrate on some of his ideas which, perhaps, were not covered in the eulogies. For the truth is that Solzhenitisn fell from favour in the West because he would not endorse its program of pursuing the great Enlightenment dream. When he came to the West in the 1970s, it was expected that he would not only condemn the regime which imprisoned him but that he would also enthusiastically take up the cause of freedom in the secular, democratic state epitomised by The American Way. This, after all, is what his fellow dissident Andrei Sakarov had done after a fashion. Sakharov looked forward with confidence in science and the triumph of human reason whereas Solezhenitsyn tended to look backwards to the religion of pre-Petrine Russia. No one has put the contrast better than Ernest Gellner, who supposed that Solzhenitsyn "opposes Bolshevism not because it differs from the West, but because it is Western…" This is well put. The stand-off between Solzhenitsyn and the West centres on one simple difference—materialism versus metaphysics. Solzhenitsyn saw both Marxism and Capitalism as two versions of the same thing:

> Karl Marx was able to say in 1844 that "communism is naturalized humanism." This statement turned out not to be entirely senseless. One does see the same stones in the foundations of a despiritualized humanism

> and of any type of socialism: endless materialism; freedom from religion and religious responsibility, which under communist regimes reach the stage of anti-religious dictatorship; concentration on social structures with a seemingly scientific approach. (This is typical of the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century and of Marxism). Not by coincidence all of communism's meaningless pledges and oaths are about Man, with a capital M, and his earthly happiness. At first glance it seems an ugly parallel: common traits in the thinking and way of life of today's West and today's East? But such is the logic of materialistic development.
>
> The interrelationship is such, too, that the current of materialism which is most to the left always ends up by being stronger, more attractive and victorious, because it is more consistent. Humanism without its Christian heritage cannot resist such competition. We watch this process in the past centuries and especially in the past decades, on a world scale as the situation becomes increasingly dramatic. Liberalism was inevitably displaced by radicalism, radicalism had to surrender to socialism and socialism could never resist communism. The communist regime in the East could stand and grow due to the enthusiastic support from an enormous number of Western intellectuals who felt a kinship and refused to see communism's crimes. When they no longer could do so, they tried to justify them. In our Eastern countries, communism has suffered a complete ideological defeat; it is zero and less than zero. But Western intellectuals still look at it with interest and with empathy, and this is precisely what makes it so immensely difficult for the West to withstand the East.
>
> (Harvard Address: *A World Split Apart* 1978)

Such statements were doubtless as welcome to many of Solzhenitsyn's Harvard audience as a blowfly at a barbeque. Thereafter, he was quietly ignored. Nonetheless, what he predicted in this speech has largely come to pass within the space of thirty years and the results are routinely bemoaned in the conservative press. The problem is that most conservative thinkers today are in agreement with his description of the West's afflictions but cannot accept either the aetiology of the disease nor his suggested cure:

> Two hundred or even fifty years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual could be granted boundless freedom simply for the satisfaction of his instincts or whims. Subsequently, however, all such limitations were discarded everywhere in the West; a total liberation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice. State systems were becoming increasingly and totally materialistic. The West ended up by truly enforcing human rights, sometimes even excessively, but man's sense of responsibility to God and society grew dimmer and dimmer. In the past decades, the legalistically selfish aspect of Western approach and thinking has reached its final dimension and the world wound up in a harsh spiritual crisis and a

> political impasse. All the glorified technological achievements of Progress, including the conquest of outer space, do not redeem the Twentieth century's moral poverty which no one could imagine even as late as in the Nineteenth Century.

In later life, Solzhenitsyn was an unashamed champion of religion—in his case the Russian Orthodox Church—as the only hope for humanity. He went into the camps as an atheist and came out a Christian. This was a conversion and baptism by fire. For him, the only remedy against (and the only response to) the absolute power of the state was the absolute love contained in the Christian message. Nothing else would work—not guns and revolution, not politics and, most certainly, not appeals to reason. This was the indigestible message that he delivered to the West.

One senses that Solzhenitzyn has gone to the heart of the matter. With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the hybridisation of Chinese communism with capitalism it may be that the last and greatest challenge for the West is not the choice between alternative political, social, or economic systems but rather between a future with or without a sense of the Sacred. For Solzhenitsyn, "the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but through all human hearts." It boils down to this simple question: can a wholly secular culture maintain a civic community in the absence of some system of transcendent and immutable reference points? No amount of science or philosophising will aid us in that choice because human reason is equally helpless on both sides. In that respect, our position has not changed one iota since the very birth of Western thought. It always has been a question of faith—faith in ourselves or faith in something greater than ourselves. Solzhenitsyn took the latter faith—the faith of Tradition. It would be fitting, therefore that I conclude with part of a prayer composed by Solzhenitsyn after he had become famous:

> Atop the ridge of earthly fame,
> I look back in wonder at the path which I alone could never have found,
> A wondrous path through despair to this point
> From which I too, could transmit to mankind
> A reflection of Your rays.
> And as much as I must still reflect
> You will give me.
> But as much as I cannot take up
> You will have already assigned to others.

THE PRIEST AND THE JESTER

The Achievement of Lezsek Kolakowski (1927-2009)

That our particular outlook or view of the world is greatly influenced by the era in which we live—what is often called "the spirit of the times"—is self-evident. Yet, throughout history, failure to notice this obvious truth has been the cause of much human misery. When some new worldview offering itself as the provider of all meaning and purpose in life comes to prominence, the false confidence it engenders invariably leads to tragedy.

Perhaps in no other time has this been as obvious as it was in the twentieth century. In the first half of that century the twin evils of Fascism and Stalinism, on the promise of a new world order, tore Europe apart and killed or enslaved millions of people. Those who were born in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century and witnessed these horrors are, as a rule, much more sensitive to the dangers inherent in the *Zeitgeist.* Lezsek Kolakowski was such a one. As a schoolboy in Poland, he witnessed the Warsaw ghetto and his father was killed by the Gestapo. Not surprisingly, as a young adult he became an enthusiastic supporter of communism and saw it as providing a new and permanent order of peace and prosperity. Very quickly, though, as the inexorable logic of the ideology worked itself out, the iron grip of Stalinism was to produce human misery which, both in scale and barbarity, was to eventually match and perhaps even overtake that which had preceded it.

Kolakowski, like so many other European intellectuals of that era, was to change his attitude to communism very rapidly. He began to criticise the system and, in 1966, was expelled from the Party. Soon after, he went into exile, occupying prominent university positions in both England and America. When Kolakowski died, most newspaper obituaries concentrated on his penetrating analyses of Marxist theory published in three volumes as *The Main Currents of Marxism* (1976-8). This is widely regarded as a masterly work which argues, amongst other things, that Stalinism was a logical outcome of Marxism and not an aberration. A tribute by Sev Sternhell in *Quadrant* of September 2009 also reproduced one of Kolakowski's better known short essays on political philosophy. This present encomium is an attempt to demonstrate the extraordinary range of Kolakowski's intellectual interests and the continuing relevance of his ideas. Indeed, it might be said that his early disaffection with Marxism was merely the spark which ignited his interest in a far wider range of

subjects. And almost always, these issues were associated with problems which have occupied the minds of philosophers since the time of Plato, and perhaps even earlier. The trouble with philosophy is that, if you persist with it, you are eventually forced to consider the very validity of human reasoning itself. Even his works of fiction (*Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia*, *The Keys to Heaven*) deal with the theme of human imperfection and the futile attempts of human reason to deal with infinitude, history, and nature. And so, the first and most important point to make about Kolakowski's output is that it was nearly always concerned with the permanent problems of human existence and rarely with purely current issues. If he did deal with the latter, it was always to dissect out of them their often unconscious reliance on some much more permanent issue in the history of ideas.

As a philosopher, Kolakowski wrote important works on the history of positivism, commentaries on the philosophies of Husserl, Bergson, Spinosa and Pascal, and works on many more general aspects of philosophy, both modern and ancient. He was especially interested in metaphysics and part of his reason for studying positivism was to investigate its fruitless attempt to purge philosophy of all metaphysical content. But from quite early in his career, Kolakowski was intensely interested in religion or more precisely, in those murky areas between philosophy, science and religion. He had a knack of writing about 'the big questions' in religion and philosophy in a way that was both entertaining and lucid and, above all, accessible to the non-specialist reader. That he should have been so interested in religion is unusual for he professed no particular faith and was widely regarded as an agnostic. Others, though, regarded him as a non-practicing Christian and it is certainly true that he often defended Christianity and, in particular, Catholicism.

Despite this huge range of philosophical interests, it is possible to discern a common theme in nearly all his writing. His overriding interest was in the battle between tradition and progress or change, that is to say, between structure and development. This, he characterized as "the antagonism between the priest and the jester" in an early essay from the 1950s:

> The antagonism between a philosophy that perpetuates the absolute and a philosophy that questions accepted absolutes seems incurable, as incurable as that which exists between conservatism and radicalism in all aspects of human life. This is the antagonism between the priest and the jester, and in almost every epoch the philosophy of the priest and the philosophy of the jester are the two most general forms of intellectual culture. The priest is the guardian of the absolute; he sustains the cult of the final and the obvious as acknowledged by and contained in tradition. The jester is he who moves

> in good society without belonging to it, and treats it with impertinence; he who doubts all that appears self-evident. He could not do this if he belonged to good society; he would then be at best a salon scandalmonger. The jester must stand outside good society and observe it from the sidelines in order to unveil the non-obvious behind the obvious, the non-final behind the final; yet he must frequent society so as to know what it holds sacred and to have the opportunity to address it impertinently.
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> (*Marxism and Beyond*, Paladin, 1971)

Underlying this antagonism is the perceived antagonism between Enlightenment reason and faith. A large part of Kolakowski's writing is devoted to this theme (see, for instance, his *Religion*, Fontana Paperbacks, 1982) and he maintains that the antagonism is an artifact—a product of the method of enquiry used. Neither reason nor faith can be chased down to some indisputable bedrock of epistemological certainty. Both, in the final analysis, involve philosophical presuppositions which are arbitrary and contestable. Of far greater importance for Kolakowski are the social and political outcomes that the two positions can and have created.

The battle between the priest and the jester can be treated under three general headings or themes, all of which have come under Kolakowski's careful scrutiny—sometimes in his role as the jester (his disaffection with Marxist orthodoxy, for instance) and sometimes as priest (his insistence on the need for some form of transcendent wisdom in formulating moral criteria). The first is the question of human perfectibility and the quest for utopia. The second has to do with tradition and the need for what he calls "taboos" in establishing moral criteria. The third theme is the persistence of religious ideas in secular culture and the unsuccessful attempts to explain the religious mode of thought in secular terms.

It is hardly surprising given his early experiences with Marxism that Kolakowski should have written so much on the theme of utopia and on the quest for human perfectibility. Marxism is a utopian vision which completely ignores the frailties of the human condition and rejects the general idea of human imperfectability which, in the earlier Western Tradition, took the form of the Fall and the consequences of Original Sin. These, for Kolakowski, constitute a sort of Kantian *synthetic a priori* in human affairs and are much more than just religious ideas from another age. They are simply part and parcel of the human condition and all of our intellectual endeavours come under their unavoidable limitations. Political utopias which attempt to bring about perfect human fraternity are inevitably bound to produce a highly despotic society.

There are other variants of the utopian quest which have felt the sharp blade of Kolakowski's intellect. One is that extreme version of positivist philosophy which sees science as ultimately providing answers to all of the traditional problems of philosophy:

> Positivism, when it is radical, renounces the transcendental meaning of truth and reduces logical values to features of biological behaviour. The rejection of the possibility of synthetic judgments *a priori*—the fundamental act constituting positivism as a doctrine—can be identified with the reduction of all knowledge to biological responses; induction is merely one form of the conditioned reflex, and to ask, 'Under what conditions is induction legitimate?' is to ask, 'Under what conditions is the acquisition of a given reflex biologically advantageous?' (*Positivist Philosophy: From Hume to the Vienna Circle*. Penguin, 1972)

Even milder forms of positivism cannot escape his critique for he sees the attempt to proscribe or limit the bounds of philosophy by people like Carnap and Ayer as an act of escape from those enduring problems of philosophy—a purely voluntary act to disassociate oneself from any concept or idea that cannot be correctly formulated by some rule of language or sentence construction.

Behind much of Kolakowski's thought on utopias and human perfectibility is the question of evil. Evil, for Kolakowski, is something real. It is not the result of faulty social institutions, or a lack of education, or a sort of sediment from our past history. All of these 'explanations' presuppose the possibility of our capacity to overcome evil via our own efforts. Even worse, by repackaging it in these terms we judge ourselves to be innocent and simply revert to the Socratic idea that evil is merely ignorance. It has the effect too, of relieving the individual of all responsibility for his or her actions. So it is that today, we see such things as individuals suing tobacco companies because of their lung cancers.

The second discernible theme in much of Kolakowski's writing is concerned with the validation of cognitive and moral rules. He argues that it is only within the context of an intact Tradition (which means, in effect, a religious Tradition—the word is capitalized to emphasize that it is more than simply a set of customs or habits) that cognitive and moral rules can be validated at all. The attempts by moral philosophers over the years, beginning with Kant and continuing in our own era with people like John Rawls, to somehow fashion moral rules from a wholly secular base are doomed. They are doomed, Kolakowski maintains, because morality is not a set of normative utterances, but a lived allegiance to an order of "taboos". The word taboo here seems to be borrowed from Mircea Eliade, whom Kolakowski had obviously read. It is difficult to portray the exact

meaning of this word as used by Kolakowski but he clearly owes little to Freud, who also wrote on this subject. The taboo is not a law in our normal use of that word. It is one of the parameters of a Tradition and always belongs in the realm of the sacred. Its most important feature has to do pre-eminently with the sense of guilt that arises spontaneously when it is transgressed. For Kolakowski, we do not assent to our moral beliefs by admitting "this is true", but by feeling guilty if we fail to comply with them. Our response is automatic, and not a product of reasoned analysis.

The third theme in Kolakowski's writings—the attempts to accommodate or 'explain' religious belief within some overarching cognitive scheme, is perhaps his most important contribution of all. There are many components to his argument here. His analysis of positivist philosophy, which I have mentioned above, led him to consider the attempts by people like Comte, Avenarius, Mach, Herbert Spencer, and others to subsume religious belief and religious experience under some overall scientific schema. This idea was given tremendous impetus by Darwinism and, indeed, the whole movement is still very much alive today in the ideas of people such as E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins. But if we grant the evolutionary schema, Kolakowski points out that a real dilemma ensues. When we consider that the pre-occupation with metaphysical ideas has been a feature of human thinking for as long as recorded history, we need to explain (under the evolutionary schema) why such a biologically useless, nay harmful, trait should have developed at all. Included under this umbrella of metaphysical ideas is religious thought and religious symbolism. If religious symbols/ideas are only means or channels by which various social, economic, or libidinal needs are expressed, why are such needs not expressed directly? When science is used in this way, religion must be explained as some sort of adaptation providing survival benefits or, alternatively, as some sort of unavoidable by-product—like the coccyx or vestigial tail-bone in humans. No other type of explanation is allowable because it would tend to invalidate the very grounds upon which all explanation is deemed to depend.

But here, we need to go back a step and look at the history of the modern scientific method. It is often said that the drive to understand nature began with the ancient Greeks and is thus a consistent feature of Western thought. This overlooks the fact that all early attempts to understand nature, right through to the end of the medieval period, posited such understanding within a religious context. It was principally with Descartes and Francis Bacon that we first see the understanding of nature sundered from religion. This trend gained enormous force during the Enlightenment and eventually came to be regarded as the only

valid way in which nature could be understood. Its popularity was enormously increased by the obvious success of the scientific method in providing beneficial results to humankind. But this particular approach was in itself neither rational nor irrational according to Kolakowski. It merely reflected human passions, not human knowledge, because 'truth' and 'effectiveness' are two quite different things. Also, we tend to forget that the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and even Newton, were made possible because each of these men held certain Platonic or Neoplatonic notions regarding a pre-ordained harmony in the universe. Had they relied entirely on empirical observations, we may well ask whether they would have had the same degree of success. And so, at the end of the day the supposed conflict between science and religion is actually a cultural conflict which reflects a hierarchy of preferences.

Thus, the attempts at explaining away the religious mode of existence are, for Kolakowski, wholly futile because the "language of the sacred" belongs to a totally different order of understanding. In sacred language, the act of understanding merges with the act of believing and the usual fact/value distinction employed in the conventional philosophy of language does not apply. When William Blake supposed that "truth cannot be told in such a way as to be understood and not believed", he was describing the operation of sacred language. From such a religious perspective, it is quite proper to use the terms 'true' or 'false' in moral judgments. Indeed, it is only in terms of the sacred language that judgments about what is right or wrong, good or evil, may be validated. Thus, that often ridiculed phase "if there is no God everything is permissible", is absolutely correct in Kolakowski's analysis. From this, one can easily see how it is that he arrives at the conclusion that moral rules can only have a real force and an unambiguous meaning from within a religious Tradition. In this he is followed by another former Marxist and philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre whose devastating analysis of the contemporary scene in moral discourse (*After Virtue*) is widely recognised.

It is all too easy to dismiss Kolakowski as a mere theoretician whose ideas have little relevance to the practical issues of here and now. To demonstrate the falseness of this view, I would like to finish this essay by considering the relevance of Kolakowski's analyses to just such a current issue. The issue I have chosen is the continuing attempt, from within, to 'reform' the Catholic Church. Outsiders might well regard this as simply a demarcation dispute, not dissimilar to that seen in the union movement, but if you have any sympathy with Kolakowski's view of the world, it is much more and it has the potential for far-reaching consequences. The issue has been quietly bubbling away for decades now but was

given fresh impetus by the recent publication of an open letter to Catholic Bishops by the dissident Catholic priest and theologian, Hans Kung.

That this is of importance to more than just Catholics ought to be obvious. Catholicism is now the largest single Christian sect in the world and many non-Catholics (including Kolakowski himself) have concerned themselves with Catholic issues because of the inextricable historical link between Christianity and what remains of that entity called the Western Tradition. Kolakowski has called Christian religiosity "the seminary of the European Spirit". When, in his famous message to Congress, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that "we cannot escape history", he had the future in mind. But the past is equally important for it is only through the past that we can identify who we are. It is, in this sense, a continuing frame of reference by which we approach the problems of our own era and bring the past to bear in making our judgments. Without such a frame of reference we disappear into that vast and featureless sea of negation called cultural relativism where all cultures, all Traditions, are either equally valid or equally invalid depending on your taste (and nothing else).

In order for a religious Tradition to persist, two things are necessary. In the first place the Tradition must be able to adapt itself to the changing circumstances of history. Secondly, it must always retain the core of its belief system—that which actually constitutes the Tradition and serves to identify it. All other matters are really peripheral to these two basic concerns. The fact that church attendances, for instances, have fallen in living memory, is no reliable indicator of the health of a particular religious Tradition. It is precisely in determining the correct balance between adaptation (or change) and maintenance of a Tradition where we see the real problem facing Catholicism today. The proponents of radical change, for whom Kung is a hero, are ranged against those who are quite understandably concerned to ensure that the doctrinal identity of the Church—its *raison d'etre*—is not compromised.

As I have indicated above, this was a particularly important area for Kolakowski. That which constitutes the Tradition is, in very large part, the realm of the sacred. That is to say, it properly belongs outside secular history and, indeed, is used to actually give some meaning to secular history. This was part of Christopher Dawson's thesis as explained in a recent *Quadrant* article by Gregory Haines (May 2010). In the case of Catholicism, that which constitutes the realm of the sacred includes not just biblical revelation but also a specific structure of temporal authority devolving down through the Pope, the Cardinals and thence to Bishops and Priests. This structure, although it may mimic a secular, political structure, has as its basis, a divine authority given to the Apostle Peter and, in the

Catholic Tradition, handed on to his successors in that which is called the Apostolic Succession. Although this state of affairs obviously had its origins in human history, its mandate is seen as divine. As such, it is immutable. This is one of the core beliefs of the Tradition, but today that authority is being tested from within so as to push the always uneasy balance between structure and development, tradition and progress, dangerously in the direction of change. It is done, of course, with the best of intentions, and its proponents suppose that the tensions thus produced are creative tensions. But tensions of this sort can be destructive too. How does one judge?

The short answer is that no-one can arrive at the best balance simply by the application of human reason. The desire for full ecumenism, for the ordination of women priests and married priests, for greater local autonomy in church matters—all these have their genesis in the attempt to apply secular, democratic ideas, born of human reason, to an institution in which the religious notion of human freedom is entirely different to that which attains in the secular realm. The only possible way in which these matters can be resolved is for those charged with temporal authority in the Church to reflect upon these matters in the light of Scripture and Tradition—that is to say, in the light of revelation—and make their decisions on this basis alone. Nothing else can aid in this process—no supposed precedent from history, no weight of popular opinion, and no application of democratic principles. We are dealing here with the realm of 'taboo', as understood by Kolakowski, and its only referent is the sacred.

Back in 1989, Kolakowski was interviewed on this general theme by the Melbourne journalist and broadcaster, Paul Gray. This, in part, is what he had to say:

> It would be silly, foolish, to object to the Church on the grounds that it is "traditionalist". The whole strength of the Church is that it is faithful to its tradition—otherwise, what is the Church for? If the Church is going to become a political party which merely adapts its beliefs to changing opinions, it can be safely dismissed altogether, because there are political parties doing such things. If the Church is there to sanctify and bless in advance every change in intellectual and moral fashion in our civilisation, then again—what is the Church for? The Church is strong because it has a traditional teaching, a spiritual kernel, which it considers its immutable essence. It cannot just yield to any pressure from people who think that whatever is in fashion at the present moment should immediately be adopted by the Church as its own teaching, whether in the field of political ideas or of daily life.

Kung and those who support him suppose that the Church must undergo radical change in order to accommodate the perceived needs of the *zeitgeist.* The danger posed by his radical agenda cannot simply be dismissed as a example of creative tension for its aim is essentially a destructive makeover which would see a single religious Tradition and its attendant authority fragmented into a myriad of 'national' churches each evolving a particular structure and form of worship as 'democratic principles' dictate. Under this scenario one can expect that each will eventually become yet another discrete Christian sect. At last count, there were some 38,000 identifiable Christian sects. The great majority of these had their origin with a Hans Kung and each Hans Kung is confident that God is on his/her side. Each one had, as part of its motivation, a conviction that its predecessor was wrong. Among these 38,000, some speak in tongues, some heal by laying hands, and some can prophesy. Some believe in the Real Presence, some do not. Some believe in Hell, some do not. Some are ecological, some are scientific, some are transcendental, and some are mystical. One can, in surveying all this, have a degree of sympathy for Plato's view that, as this world of ours progresses through time, it drowns itself in "the infinite sea of dissimilarity".

Most religious Traditions have at their heart a set of beliefs and rituals which stand outside the secular purview and, as such, provide that unchanging reference point upon which the very survival of the Tradition depends. The requirement is certainly not restricted to Catholicism. To demonstrate this I reproduce an excerpt from A.P. Elkin's book on the Australian Aborigines titled *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*. Elkin was an Anglican clergyman of humanist outlook, and an anthropologist who devoted most of his life to the protection of Aborigines and their culture. It is written with a sense of poignancy by one who knows precisely what Kolakowski's use of the term 'taboo' really means, what is involved in the maintenance of a religious Tradition, and just what happens when it is compromised:

> But such is their loyalty to their secrets, that they never drop a hint to the white "authority" of the great world of thought, ritual and sanction of which he is unaware. They feel either that he would not understand it or that he would despise it, and so the "past-masters", the old custodians of secret knowledge sit in the camp, sphinx-like, watching with eagle eye the effect of white contact on the young men, and deciding how much, if any, of the knowledge of their fathers can be safely entrusted to them, and just when the imparting of the secrets can be effectively made. If the young men are too much attracted to the white man's ways, if they are inclined to despise the old ways, and above all if they show a looseness of living which denotes lack of stability in character, the old men either teach them nothing,

> or else traditional false versions of some myths as a means of testing their sincerity and loyalty. But only too often, after contact with the white man, the time is never propitious for the imparting of 'truth', and so the secrets pass away with the old men; and though the latter die in sorrow knowing that the old rites and myths will pass into oblivion, that the sacred places will no longer be cared for, and that the tribe is doomed to extinction, yet they die triumphantly, having been loyal to their trust.

To be sure, the current challenge by Kung hardly puts Catholicism in the same category as Aboriginal religious Traditions because the danger for the former comes from within. Moreover, there has been a healthy and growing counter-trend within the Church which re-asserts the importance of its Tradition. Nonetheless, Kung represents a real danger because in an age when secular democracy has demonstrated its obvious superiority over totalitarian rivals, there is always that temptation to suppose that the structures of authority within a religious system of belief ought to mirror those of the secular society around it. But the mission of Christianity, if I recall the words of its founder correctly, was to change the world, not to be changed by it.

SMELLING A RAT

As a young biologist, I began my career studying a variety of pest animals, most of which had, wittingly or unwittingly, been introduced into Australia. I began with foxes and wild dogs, later moving down the scale (in size, but not in significance) to rabbits and plague mice. In the course of my investigations, I had cause to work with scientists from the various States as well as from CSIRO. As you might imagine, ours was a rather small and close-knit circle. We got to know each other fairly well. There were specialised Pest Control Conferences held every three years, as well as an Australian Wildlife Management Society, which held annual conferences. Joint projects were not uncommon and, in the case of plague mouse research, the Australian Wheat Board had funded co-ordinated studies in the drier grain-growing areas of all those States which had a significant mouse problem in plague years.

And so it was that I became involved in a joint study on the population biology of mice. We had a site in the Victorian Mallee, centred on a little town called Walpeup. At national and international conferences we were invariably asked "where the hell is Walpeup"? To this we had an unvarying reply: "Halfway between Galah and Torrita". This research was part of a large project, involving the CSIRO and three of the grain-growing States. We were, all of us, young, fairly enthusiastic, and as you might expect not adverse to a bit of mild ribbing amongst ourselves. Occasionally, there might be a mild practical joke and I have to confess to setting up a few myself. It was only a matter of time before my rather poor attempts provoked a retaliation, the substance of which I will now relate.

There arrived in my office one morning a small brown paper parcel, tied with thick, hairy string of a sort rarely seen nowadays except in the bush. It was addressed in a neat hand and bore a postmark from the Patchewollock Post Office. On removing the wrapping there was, on top of the box, a note written in the same neat hand. The box itself, of oil-impregnated cardboard, was of a size and shape which might suggest that it originally contained shearing combs or cutters. Inside, lying on crumpled toilet paper, were a number of pale ovoid pellets, each about the size of a sparrow's egg. They were of a fibrous consistency and very tough. With difficulty, I managed to tease out a few strands and look at them under a microscope. They resembled nothing I had seen before and this despite years of peering down a microscope at all sorts of things from fox faeces to tapeworms and animal hairs. To this day, I have no idea what the hell they were.

And now to the letter, written by the lady of the house:

> Dear Mr Coman,
> We have heard that you are doing research on giant rats in the Mallee and I thought I would write to you as we have recently had an invasion of giant rats in our house. Although we got rid of them with Ratsak, they made an awful mess in my linen cupboard where they made their nest. We did not find any bodies, but enclosed are some of the droppings left on my sheets. I thought these might be useful in your study.
> Yours sincerely
> (Mrs) P. Long

Of course, I immediately suspected a practical joke and like the Tar Baby in *Uncle Remus*, I decided the best course was "don't say nuthin". The incident was quickly forgotten and we pressed on with the more mundane matters of gathering and analysing our data.

About a month later, I received a second small parcel, also with a note. This was another correspondent from Baring (near Patchewollock). The parcel contained a large chisel-shaped tooth, large enough, I should have thought, to come from a beaver. The correspondent (male this time, writing in a distinctly agricultural style) informed me that he had shot a giant rat some time ago "in the bush near home" and later extracted two teeth from the skeletal remains as proof of the size of the beast. Some measurements of the carcase followed (in feet and inches!) plus a description of the tail—hairless and "sort of flattened at the end". Again, I determined not to give these hoaxers the satisfaction of a reply. In any case, I knew that any letter of reply would be returned with a polite note from the Patchewollock Post Office—"not known at this address".

There followed, a month or so later, yet another handwritten letter from one "Barry Richards", RMB Patchewollock. There was a certain urgency in the message. Barry needed my advice on ridding his property of "bloody big mice". "These", he said, "are causing a fair bit of trouble with the Missus in the house". There were also hordes of them in his woolshed. By this time, I had decided to open a new file, tabbed "giant rats". I have the contents in front of me as I write this account.

After a somewhat longer gap—perhaps a couple of months—yet another parcel arrived from the bush. This was much larger, a shoe box, perhaps. Again, the rudely-formed handwriting but this time the parcel was posted from Manangatang, another Mallee town, not far away. Inside was the preserved carcase of a truly enormous rat, about the size of a ring-tailed possum. A short note accompanied the specimen (I have lost it) along these lines: "At last the Missus and I managed to trap one of these buggers in a rabbit trap set in the

kitchen cupboard. Can you tell us what poison to use"? By this time, my research colleague was visibly excited. "It has to be a new species", he said. "There's no rat that big recorded for the Mallee". And, indeed, he had a point. All of our native rats in Victoria are smallish creatures, certainly no bigger than a European brown or black rat (both of which we have). But this specimen was at least double the size. Even our native Water Rat did not measure up to this beast and, in any case, such rats would find it rather hard going up Patchewollock way. There is that story of a Patchewollock man who was, one day, struck on the forehead by a drop of rain. It took two buckets of dust to revive him.

But then, I smelt a faint whiff of Bouins solution. This is a specialised preservative used by biologists and pathologists for histological examinations, and I very much doubt that a Mallee cocky would have such stuff in his shed. Further south, he might have formalin, but this was not footrot country (formalin being the universal treatment for footrot in those days). It was time to consult the books. Taking down a copy of Ellis Troughton's *Furred Animals of Australia*, I leafed through, looking for possible candidates. After some searching, I found a match. This was one of the giant rats of the Cape York area, probably *Uromys caudimaculatus* or *Melomys capensis* (taxonomists continue to quarrel over species names). A note on *Uromys* from the *Australian Museum's Complete Book of Australian Mammals* tells me that this rat is a nuisance species: "With its formidable incisors it is able to open cans of food and some who have suffered from the depredations of this rodent swear that it is able to read labels!" Clearly, this specimen was a long way from home. I had foiled their little plot, whoever 'they' were. And, indeed, this was a bit of a problem. None of my research colleagues worked in the Top End, so this had to be a specimen collected for a museum or other study collection. At CSIRO, the famous John Calaby, perhaps Australia's greatest mammal expert, would have this specimen in his lab. But I had only met John once or twice and he had no reason to pull off a stunt like this. Perhaps someone had persuaded him to give up a specimen? Maybe a swap was arranged? Who knows?

There, as I then thought, the matter finished. But I had underestimated the tenacity and evil genius of these perpetrators (for I had already decided that this was probably a co-operative effort, involving at least two people). About a week after receiving the giant rat, an airmail letter arrived on my desk. This was no missive from a Mallee cocky, but a smart, typewritten address on an envelope with the letterhead *Muséum National D'Histoire Naturelle*. Inside, the paper, bearing the same letterhead, was thin, but expensive looking. As I hold it up to

the light now, the watermark *OCF Savoyeux* is clearly visible. The correspondent, claiming to be one Monsieur Petter, got straight down to business:

> Cher Monsieur Coman,
>
> J,ai appris que vous faites des recherches en ce moment sur les rats geants de la region nord-ouest de Victoria, et que vous avez trouvez une nouvelle espéce. Comme vous probablement savez, je suis spécialiste des rongeurs africains et je m'occupe en ce moment avec les rats géants de l'Africque et de l'Amerique du Sud… and so on

Having identified his own interest in the giant rats of Africa and South America, he went on to suggest the possibility of some joint studies. To further identify his own interests, he had gone to the trouble of including a reprint of his recent paper, ELEMENTS D'UNE REVISION DES *ACOMYS* AFRICAINS, UN SOUS-GENRE NOUVEAU, *PERACOMYS* PETTER ET ROCHE, 1981. I have this in front of me now and it is all perfectly genuine. *Acomys* and *Peracomys* are, indeed, genera or sub-genera of rodents. Mr Petter did, indeed, deliver this paper at the Proceedings of the International Colloquium on the Ecology and Taxonomy of African Small Mammals, held in Antwerp in 1981.

What could be done? I sat down and composed a short paper entitled "Trade and Communication in pre-European Australia". The gist of this paper was to suggest that the appearance of giant NT rats in Victoria's Mallee was explicable only in terms of relocation via human hands. My thesis was that the tail of *Uromys* was of an ideal size and length for use as a sort of pipe-cleaner in didgeridoos. Moreover, the naked end of the tail provided a useful hand grip. You must imagine that, over time, the instruments would accumulate a certain amount of dried spittle, deleteriously affecting the tuning. It is easy to imagine a north-south trading arrangement for such a valuable asset. The paper went on at some length, quoting evidence from early European explorers, the finding of NT boomerangs carved from Mallee Black Box, etc. Copies were sent to the three main suspects. No acknowledgments were received.

All of this happened over thirty years ago. Over that time period I have repeatedly interrogated all of the possible suspects in this business. In every case and on every occasion, I have been greeted with a blank look and grave shaking of the head. I will go to my grave without discovering the identity of the perpetrators.

So ended the saga of the giant rat. It brings to mind a curious little aside in Conan's Doyle's *Adventure of the Sussex Vampire* when Sherlock Holmes says to Watson: "Matilda Briggs was not the name of a young woman, Watson ... It was a ship which is associated with the giant rat of Sumatra, a story for which the world is not yet prepared".

[Note on Ellis Troughton: I had the pleasure of meeting “Troughtie” on a couple of occasions. He was a very amiable fellow. The giant rats would have been very familiar to him as he spent a lot of time collecting specimens in New Guinea, where such beasts are common. His favourite story concerns one collection trip, towards the end of his life. He suffered from a bad heart and could not walk uphill any great distance. To solve the problem, the natives built a litter and carried him up some of the steeper climbs. On one occasion, he met up with an Australian official ‘out bush’ who enquired about his strange mode of transport. “It’s the old ticker”, said Troughtie, “she’s buggered”. After exchanging pleasantries, they moved on. Soon after, they met a group of natives coming down the trail. This called for a ‘smoko’ stop and a yarn. In the course of the conversation between the two groups of natives (in pidgin) Troughtie heard the newcomers enquiring as to what was wrong with the white bloke. “Klok belong him bugarup pinish”, one of his bearers replied. Troughtie was very fond of recounting this story.]

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE ORNAMENTAL HERMIT

I first came across the idea of the ornamental or garden hermit in one of Peter Simple's columns in the *Daily Telegraph*. Peter Simple was the alias of Michael Wharton and his column, which ran for many decades, was a hugely popular satirical site with a list of characters notable both for their evocative names and their particular social and political pathologies. There was a literary critic called Julian Birdbath, a motoring enthusiast called J. Bonington Jagworth, an orchestra conductor called Sir Jim Gastropodi (who discovered several new Mahler symphonies including *The Insufferable* and *The Interminable*), and a psychoanalyst called Dr Heinz Kiosk. Amongst this marvellous cast of characters was one R.S. Viswaswami, a naked Indian hermit or *sadhu* employed by the Stretchford Council to inhabit its hermitage on an island in Stretchford Park Lake.

I had always assumed that the ornamental hermit was simply a product of Wharton's immensely fertile imagination. It is not so! Recently, I was given a copy of Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics* (Penguin Books, 1971) and there I found a marvellous essay entitled "Ancients and Ornamental Hermits". Such hermits were, indeed, real, and Sitwell provides examples:

> The Hon. Charles Hamilton, whose estate was at Pains' Hall, near Cobham, Surrey, and who lived in the reign of King George II, was one of these admirers of singularity and silence and, having advertised for a hermit, he built a retreat for this ornamental but retiring person on a steep mound in his estate…

According to Sitwell, the 'position statement' for the job was quite detailed and, to receive the promised remuneration of seven hundred pounds the successful applicant was required:

> … to continue in the hermitage seven years where he should be provided with a Bible, optical glasses, a mat for his feet, a hassock for his pillow, an hourglass for his timepiece, water for his beverage, and food from the house. He must wear a camlet robe, and never, under any circumstances, must he cut his hair, beard, or nails …

It seems that the successful applicant only lasted three weeks! I wonder why?

In more recent times, there has been an authoritative account of garden hermits by Gordon Campbell entitled *The Hermit in the Garden: from Imperial Rome to the Garden Gnome* (OUP, 2013). Like me, Campbell's imagination was fired after he read Edith Sitwell's account, and so he set out to examine the phenomenon in more detail. There is such a thing as an over-exhaustive account

and I have to say that Campbell's book falls into this category. Nonetheless, it makes fascinating reading and the author is to be commended for his incredible literary detective work. The problem that Campbell has is paucity of well-documented cases contrasted with an abundance of anecdotal evidence. This forces him to consider a huge volume of peripheral information and the reader finds it difficult to keep up with a huge cast of characters—much like a Russian novel!

What clearly emerges, though, is the fact that the ornamental hermit was very much a product of the 18th C or, more precisely, the Georgian era. There were earlier hermitages, both in England and on the Continent, but they were occupied by genuine hermits or, in some cases, were merely places of retreat for their rich owners. Only in the 18th C, it seems, did some of the more wealthy and eccentric landowners consider the idea of hiring 'fake' hermits.

Of course, real hermits in the Western Tradition, and not the ornamental type, date back to the late Roman Empire. Amongst the earliest and most famous were the Desert Fathers and I direct the interested reader to a very famous and sympathetic account by Helen Waddell (*The Desert Fathers*). The age of the true hermit came to an end with the Reformation although in the Catholic tradition, hermit-like monks continue to this day (e.g. Carthusians).

Many of the 18th C hermitages described by Campbell were either devoid of 'hermits' or were furnished merely with props—dummies dressed as hermits. In some cases, automata were employed, with the dummy having limited movement via mechanical contrivances. As Campbell points out, this was the age of automata and he gives the quaint example of Jacques de Vaucanson's defecating duck of 1739 (which was driven by a clockwork mechanism). But even those hermitages devoid of real or dummy hermits were usually furnished with objects serving as *memento mori*—reminders of human mortality. There might be a human skull on a table or even a ruined tomb in the hermitage yard. Often, the particular fit-out of the hermitage was such as to give the impression that the resident hermit had just stepped out to stretch his legs—an open book on the table, eating utensils, etc.

Campbell supposes that the whole phenomenon of the hermitage in this phase of English history was associated with a curious longing or enjoyment of melancholia. It was most certainly not a genuinely religious sentiment which moved rich landholders to construct their hermitages. The enjoyment of the melancholic state is difficult for us to understand but it has something to do with an intense *longing* for something (we know not what), where the very longing

itself is a sort of pleasurable experience. In his autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis gives this description of such longing:

> …it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want.

Perhaps the best example of attempts used to achieve such pensive sadness (and the one used by Campbell) is Milton's poem, *Il Penseroso*. Here are the last ten lines:

> And may at last my weary age
> Find out the peaceful hermitage,
> The hairy gown and mossy cell,
> Where I may sit and rightly spell
> Of every star that Heav'n doth shew,
> And every herb that sips the dew;
> Till old experience do attain
> To something like prophetic strain.
> These pleasures, Melancholy, give,
> And I with thee will choose to live.

But, of course, our estate owners wanted to induce such a feeling in a more tangible way and, along with their secluded hermitages, they often had miniature replicas of ruined temples, and moss-covered monuments.

The phenomenon of the ornamental hermit was relatively short lived. Campbell suggests that growing abolitionist sentiment in England spilt over into other areas, and the idea of keeping someone (even if paid) for display purposes lost favour. It was regarded as a sort of semi-slavery. Thereafter, the hermitages remained, but without their human occupants. Eventually, the hermitage became little more than a garden feature—a species of the Folly, perhaps.

It is impossible to get a good understanding of the hermitage phenomenon without considering the whole landscape gardening scheme itself. This, after all, was the era of Capability Brown, of the Arcadian urge, and of an extraordinary interest in large-scale gardening. If you superimpose upon this the philosophy of Rousseau, then you begin to get a glimmer of some sort of 'back to nature' urge which prevailed in tandem with the quest for melancholia. Many of the hermitages were deliberately built in the rustic style and were called "root houses". They might consist wholly or partly of interwoven tree roots, bound

together with wire and provided with doors and windows. Campbell suggests an allusion to an imagined "Adam's House" in Eden (after the Fall, one imagines the root house would have leaked badly, suffered from white rot, and attracted rats).

Today, we still see faint traces of the whole 'garden hermit' phenomenon in the garden gnome or similar figure. Why do people put concrete or pottery gnomes in their garden? Perhaps it is an attempt to capture some sort of *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, and to invest the garden with some sort of quasi-spiritual dimension. The same might be said of concrete cherubs, angels and even impish figures. How often, too, do we see concrete or clay tablets bearing poems about being "close to God" in a garden or similar?

But in the end, as it seems to me, the whole phenomenon of the garden hermitage and its attenuated modern alternatives, can be put down to a loss of the true spiritual dimension, not just in human nature, but in *all* nature. One can see, in the mad eccentricities of the Georgian landowners, a futile attempt to attain some sort of spiritual dimension in their lives. As C.S. Lewis was to discover in his own life, the experience of melancholia that they sought, the longing for something, was a real quest with a real *telos*, or end. But it was not the garden and the hermitage which they needed to tend and cultivate, but their own spiritual lives. In the century after Georgian landholders had constructed their hermitages, Matthew Arnold correctly diagnosed their pathology:

> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world.
> *(Dover Beach)*

And Arnold himself, no less than his Georgian forebears, felt the anguish. He correctly diagnosed its cause but could not accept the one thing that was able to assuage the longing.

AN ORDINARY MAN'S WAR

Often, in the early hours of the morning I would hear him cry out. Whether he woke in fright or in pain, I do not know. Perhaps it was both because pain allows only fitful, shallow sleep—the kind that engenders nightmares. Following that sudden cry in the night, I would hear my mother's soft footfall coming down the hallway. The floorboards always creaked at a certain point and then I would see the faint gleam of the candle under my bedroom door. Soon she would return with his cup of tea, the cup clinking in the saucer as she walked back down the hallway. Then I would hear murmured talk and the sound of a match being struck as he lit his cigarette. He smoked Log Cabin Fine Cut rolled in Repeater paper. Tally Ho paper made him cough, as did tailor-made cigarettes.

The shrapnel wound left him with a permanent limp. He had a sheep dog once which walked with the same sort of gait and this was a source of much amusement at the Kyneton saleyards. I only saw his wound once or twice when he rolled up his trouser leg to wade out into the lake and extend our boundary fence as the water receded in the summer. There was a huge depression on his shin, like a cricket ball might make when hitting a bag of flour. To a small child though, the most startling thing was not the wound, but the smooth, stark white skin which seemed strangely at odds with his tanned, weather-beaten face and horny hands. Only towards the end of his life did he give any sort of detailed account as to how and when he was wounded. He spoke little of the war, never went to Anzac Day celebrations and refused to consider a TPI pension until very late in life when his doctor eventually persuaded him to apply. I still have the official homecoming 'thank you' citation from the citizens and councillors of Kyneton. On the back, in a nicely executed hand are pencilled various cryptic entries such as "roan cow due 19th Mar.", and "214 first cross ewes to Carter's Paddock 12/5".

He was wounded near Passchendaele in October, 1917. There was a dawn 'hop over' and, before his little group had advanced more than a few yards, a shell lobbed among them. All of his companions were killed, and he lay there in the mud for the best part of a day before anyone answered his cries for help. It was a German soldier who first came to his aid. This puzzled us and we asked him for an explanation. It was simple enough. If you were a German soldier and your position had been overrun, the safest way to avoid being shot was to pick up a wounded enemy soldier. Forget this 'hands in the air' stuff, or white flags. But he

begged the man to put him down because the pain was too great. There were no stretcher-bearers but, eventually, two allied soldiers got him back to relative safety by sitting him on a rifle held horizontally between them, with his arms around their necks to keep his balance and to take some of the weight.

He was put onto a sort of light rail truck and pushed down to a makeshift field hospital at Ypres (which he always pronounced correctly, informing us with a laugh that many Diggers called it "wipers"). From there he was moved to a larger hospital near the coast. Only at this time did his wound receive any real attention. When he arrived, a stern looking nurse (presumably with assistance) bundled him into a large bath of hot water and left him there for over an hour. "No bloody wonder" he said, "I stunk to high heaven". The wound had become septic and they were waiting to see whether he was going to pull through or not. Resources were scarce and you could not waste them on a doomed man—there were other young men lying there on stretchers who might have a better chance of pulling through.

Needless to say, he did show signs of improvement and was shipped back to a large hospital in London. When his health had further improved, he was sent home to the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital in Melbourne where, eventually, he was able to walk again and was discharged. Soon he was to return again when further bone fragments caused excruciating pain. He was rather dismissive of all these experiences—"I was lucky compared with those poor buggers who were gassed". And here is an interesting thing. I have seen him endure all manner of suffering with hardly any sign of emotion but a single line of poetry or a few bars of music could reduce him to tears in an instant.

As to the substance of his nightmares in later life, I can only guess. Bloated corpses, scattered limbs protruding from the mud, dying men with their entrails exposed, the unanswered cries for help, and above it all, "the monstrous anger of the guns". All this and much more. The young men at Flanders "walked eye deep in hell". Only once did he mention a specific incident. There was this dead German soldier who he had to pass each day. But each day the man was in a different position. At first, the horrible thought occurred to him that the man was still alive and no-one stopped to help. Then he realized that the corpse was turned over repeatedly by souvenir hunters looking for whatever personal effects they could find.

But the War bought unexpected happiness too. During the War, many school children were asked to write letters to wounded soldiers. At Pipers Creek School, Alice Albers, a senior student, was given the name of Martin Crosbie Coman, 6741, 6th Batt., and duly composed her letter. When he eventually returned to

the family farm at Pastoria, only a short horse ride from Pipers Creek, Martin Coman decided to look up this young girl and thank her. A romance developed and they eventually got married. I am very glad they did since, notwithstanding certain famous utterances to the contrary, being is better than non-being as far as I'm concerned!

There was nothing particularly notable about the life of Martin Crosbie Coman. If the experiences in Flanders fields had provided the substance of his nightmares, they were forgotten in the daylight hours. These days, a similar experience by an Australian soldier would probably involve long sessions of 'trauma counselling'. He toiled on his little Soldier Settlers block like thousands of others and eventually paid off the debt—just a few months before the government announced a moratorium on all remaining Settler debts. About this and about most other things he took a philosophical view. He was, for most of the time, happy. He sang songs, recited snatches of poetry from his schooldays and told us children tall stories about champion sheep dogs and why ibises had bent beaks. Occasionally he would give us a litany of names from Flanders, these arranged in rhyming pairs—"Zillebeeke and Zonnebeke; Poperinghe and Vlamertinghe; Polygon Wood and Remus Wood". He and Alice went to town each Thursday for the week's supplies (and the sheep sales) and to Mass each Sunday. He aspired for no high office, for no great commercial empire. He worked, for the most part, on his own behind the plough or in the sheepyards. Outside of his little circle of family, close relatives and a few close friends, he died unknown to the wider world. Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* perfectly describes his life.

His importance and the importance of those other 152,000 wounded Australian soldiers and the 62,000 who did not come back is simply a question of how you wish to view a human life—any human life. On the very first page of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, he says that "the universe has as many centres as there are living beings in it. Each of us is a centre of the universe…" Likewise, each one of those tens of thousands of young men killed or maimed in war represented not just a part of some whole, but the whole itself—a particular and unique realisation of the universe:

Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

This, perhaps, explains why so many young people today turn out on Anzac Day. Even though they are now removed by several generations from the Great

War, they sense the enormity of what happened to an *individual* life. And they can do this without any knowledge of a particular life because, in some sense, they put themselves in the *persona* of that other being, the Unknown Soldier.

It was called 'the war to end all wars' and, in a terrible sense it did because from that point on, the meaning of warfare changed utterly. No longer was it possible to sing of arms and the man, as Virgil did, and Homer before him. There was no honour in mechanised killing and maiming—"*non dulce, non et décor"…* said Ezra Pound. How ironic that we should call the ordinary soldier a 'Private' when modern warfare strips all the dignity away from that word! On the first day of fighting on the Somme, the British lost 60,000 men cut down by a hail of metal from the indifferent guns—"quick eyes gone under earth's lid". Rounded off to the nearest million (and excluding civilians) one estimate puts the total loss of life in the Great War at 10 million with 21 million wounded. Private M.C. Coman was just one of those 21 million but his case is special. His universe of being included me. And that made all the difference.

BIRDLORE

The district of Sutton Grange in central Victoria cannot be classed as a major tourist destination. There is a community hall and a church, an abandoned school, a small cemetery, a few houses, and, of course, a Soldiers Memorial. Indeed, unless you are particularly attentive, you could speed through the place without realising that it existed. There were far more people living there one hundred years ago than there are today. Nonetheless, for the locals still living there, Sutton Grange is the centre of the habitable earth—the Omphalos. And that is how it should be. When pressed for evidence, they will start by giving you some version of that universal truth first recorded by Homer:

> And I for one, know of no sweeter sight for a man's eye than his own country... So true it is that a man's fatherland and his parents are what he holds sweetest, even though he has settled far away from his people in some rich home in foreign lands.

After that, they will become more specific and might point to a couple of noteworthy, local achievements or events. They will tell you how Thomas Walker, following in the footsteps of Major Mitchell, came through the district in 1838 and recorded in his journal: "I have not seen finer sheep land nor country more pleasing since I commenced my tour ... we considered it worthy of the name of Australia Felix." Then they might mention the invention of the sheep-drafting race in 1848 by William Lockhart Morton, an overseer on the Sutton Grange Sheep Run. For those unacquainted with sheep farming, I should explain that the drafting race enables a single person (with the aid of a good dog) to separate a mob of sheep into desired categories or types—ewes and lambs, fat lambs and store lambs, etc. Fancy versions utilize two gates and allow a three-way separation, but you need good co-ordination.

For the locals though, perhaps the most significant piece of history associated with Sutton Grange revolves about a particular schoolteacher at the little granite school, Albert Cox. He taught at the school from 1920 until 1961. As far as I am aware, this record has been topped by only one other Victorian schoolteacher. Mind you, in other trades the service records can be far more impressive. There is a story about a local man up here who started at an engineering works when he was fifteen and was given his gold watch and heavy handshake fifty years later. Angry at his forced retirement, he began his farewell address with these words: "Had I known that this bloody job was only temporary, I would never have taken it in the first place".

But it was not just his length of service at the little school that made Cox a remarkable schoolteacher. It was what he taught his students. In addition to the 'three R's', the children learned a great deal of natural history, because Albert Cox was himself a keen amateur naturalist. Each day, the children were encouraged to make a note of what birds or other animal and plant life they had seen on the way to school. These observations were then written into the Observations Book, under the careful eye of the teacher. Records were entered into this book from 1926 through until 1960, with a break during the War years only. The following entry, made by Cox himself, tells its own story of the man's love of the natural world about him and, more especially, of the way he saw the relationship between wild creatures and humans:

> On the morning of the 26th September, 1951 the thrush that had been for such a long period a friend of all at the Sutton Grange School was found dead beside the residence garden. This bird was well over thirty years old and had nested around the school residence all these years, many seasons being spent in an old billy hanging under the verandah. The bird had died of old age, being found lying with an insect still in its beak. It died in the middle of the nesting season leaving a mate to hatch out, and rear a family.

Here was a man recording the death of an old friend. This friend and close neighbour had died at work. It had performed its duty as a parent right to the very last. The whole thing is intensely anthropomorphic and modern animal behaviour experts would scoff at it. Birds, they will say, do not form these sorts of relationships with humans. It is all down to anti-predator strategy or territorial spacing behaviour, or some such. Doubtless, too, if Cox's bird were the English song thrush, he would be castigated for harbouring a non-indigenous species.

That's the sort of world we live in now. Magpies do not carol in the mornings because they are happy to see the sun rise. It's simply a vocalisation to reinforce territorial rights. And kookaburras do not signal the end of the day to all the other creatures by giving their last laugh just at that moment when dusk turns to darkness. They, again, are simply letting neighbouring kookaburras know who is in control of the local territory. Creatures respond to external stimuli, or hormones, under a strict system of genetic coding. It's the territorial imperative or the selfish gene as popularised by Robert Ardrey and Richard Dawkins, although to be fair, Descartes started the whole idea of the mechanical animal hundreds of years earlier. Animals are just glorified CD players where you shove in DNA instead of a disc. Faced with this sort of bleakness, you can sympathize with Wordsworth:

> For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
> It moves us not. —Great God! I'd rather be
> A pagan suckled in a creed outworn.

> So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
> Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

And Wordsworth is right. We have progressively isolated ourselves from the rest of the natural world. Even as little as fifty years ago, when Albert Cox was teaching at his little school, we had a far closer feel for the natural world than we do today. And that is despite all sorts of recent proclamations such as 'ecologically sustainable development', 'maintenance of biodiversity', 'clean and green' and all those other modern mantras.

Have you ever wondered why Sir David Attenborough speaks in a whisper when he is describing the lives of creatures? It is because he is on the outside looking in and it is almost embarrassing. He is a bit like a voyeur peeping through the keyhole. And you will note, if you listen to his commentary carefully, that everything is down to scientific principles of behaviourism and genetics. All is neatly packaged as cause and effect. His animals are glorified machines to be marvelled at like the intricate, jewelled workings of a Swiss watch. Granted, there is some sense of wonder, but that wonder is built on the complexity of things, not simply on the existence of things. Even Disney's outrageously contrived world of nature was better. His animals in the early TV nature shows, all decent, God-fearing American citizens circa 1960, at least had some sense of not being pre-programmed.

It is almost as if the Fall of Man is still going on. Christians tend to read the account of the Fall in *Genesis* as an historical event. But part of it may not be. One of the consequences of the Fall was a destruction of that harmony which previously existed between humans and all other life on earth. Perhaps the process of estrangement is a long-term business and we are not at the end of it yet. When you examine history, that proposition certainly seems to carry some weight.

Since we started this discussion with a quotation concerning a dead thrush, let us stick to the world of birds and to the history of their interactions with humans. There is a name for that interaction. It is called birdlore.

For us in the West, the place to start is the Greece of Homer's time. Anything earlier is mere conjecture, and anything later runs a poor second to the richness of Homer's descriptions. For him, birds are not only closely associated with humans, certain of them are also particular favourites of the gods. The scene at Calypso's cave will suffice to make the point:

> The cave was sheltered by a copse of alders and fragrant cypresses, which was the roosting place of wide-winged birds, horned owls and falcons and cormorants with long tongues, birds of the coast, whose business takes them

> down to the sea ... It was indeed a spot where even an immortal visitor must pause to gaze in wonder and delight.

There is something of a parallel here with the situation for the Aranda Aborigines in Central Australia, early last century. In their account of the Aranda (formerly known as Arunta), Balwyn Spencer and F.J. Gillen indicate that the sacred sites where the Spirit Ancestors live (the Ertnatulunga) are a haven for all sorts of wild animals, including birds. Spencer and Gillen would want us to believe that the birds and animals cluster around the sacred sites because they are not hunted at or near those spots. The Aranda would regard this as ridiculous. The birds and animals are there simply because the sites are sacred—richness of fauna is one of the manifestations of sacrality.

But, going back to ancient Greece, the most important relation between birds and humans is one of language. Humans who can understand the language of birds are seers. The birds have important things to tell us. Indeed, one of the Greek words for divination is *oionopolia* or *ornithomanteia*— 'bird language' or augury. Both Pliny the Elder and Aelian tell us that that the seers or augurs are not just skilled at interpreting the language or the actions of birds, they are also skilled in natural history. So, for instance, Aelian says:

> I have heard that some people practice divination by birds and devote themselves to their study and scrutinize their flight and quarters of the sky where they appear. And seers like Teiresias, Polydamas, Polyeidus, Theoclymenus and many another are celebrated for their knowledge of this art… (*On the Animals* VIII.5)

Now, before you dismiss augury as so much nonsense, it pays to remember that this and other forms of divination were of the utmost importance to both the Greek and the Roman Empires at the height of their respective powers. For instance, Pliny gives us this account of the importance of poultry in Imperial Rome:

> These are the birds that give the Most-Favourable Omens; these birds daily control our officers of state, and shut or open to them their own homes; these send forward or hold back the Roman rods of office and order or forbid battle formation, being the auspices of all our victories won all over the world; these hold supreme empire over the empire of the world, being as acceptable to the gods with even their inward parts and vitals as are the costliest victims. (*Natural History*, Book X. xxiv)

But we should not suppose that divination of this sort was regarded as some species of magic or that it was necessarily divinely inspired. Pausanias' (2nd C, AD) view of Greek religious practice is that of a 'moderate realist'. That is to say, his criteria for what to believe and what not to believe concerning these matters certainly involved a notion of religious faith, but they also involved human observation and human reason:

> This poetry [that of Iophon of Knossos on Amphiaraos, the famous seer] of his had an intoxicating attraction to common people, but in fact apart from those who suffered Apollonian madness none of the soothsayers in antiquity was a prophet; they were good at exegesis of dreams, the diagnosis of flights of birds, the scrying of holy entrails.

Pausanias clearly believes that true prophesy is very limited, and he makes a clear distinction between inspiration and exegesis. For him, there is no magic or divine intervention in the case of augury—it is simply a matter of correct diagnosis. I should mention in passing that Pausanias himself was a great bird lover. In his old age he took to bird watching and travelled far and wide to catch sight of different species. No doubt, he kept a bird list like any modern ornithologist.

Mind you, in order to make the correct diagnosis, you need to understand the birds and the granting of that power is a much trickier business for us to understand. For one thing, in ancient Greece, that power seems to have been often mediated by snakes! The famous seer Melampus saved the young of two dead snakes. Later, when he was asleep, these young snakes licked his ears. When he awoke, he found he could understand the language of birds. Snakes also licked the ears of Kassandra and Helenos, giving them the power of the seer.

In other cases, the gift of understanding birds seems to come by direct association with the gods. Thus, Parnassos, the inventor of divination by birds, had the nymph Kleodora for his mother and Poseidon as his father. Likewise, Teiresias was the son of the nymph Chariklo, and Phineus, another blind seer, was also the son of Poseidon. One could quote many other examples from the ancient literature.

But why should birds be important as bringers of knowledge? Part of the answer may have to do with their ancestry. In ancient Greek mythology, birds often begin as humans transformed by gods. Perhaps the most famous example is Alcyone. She was the daughter of Aeolus (king of the winds) who found her husband, Ceyx, drowned and, overcome with grief, cast herself into the sea where she drowned. The gods rewarded her devotion by turning her into a kingfisher, and Aeolus (or, perhaps, Zeus) forbade the winds to blow during the *Halcyon Days*, the seven days before and the seven after the winter solstice, when legend has it that the kingfisher lays its eggs. Pliny gives us a detailed account:

> They breed at midwinter, on what are called 'the kingfisher days', during which the sea is calm and navigable, especially in the neighbourhood of Sicily. They make their nests a week before the shortest day, and lay a week after it. Their nests are admired for their shape, that of a ball slightly projecting with a very narrow mouth, resembling a very large sponge; they cannot be cut with a knife, but break at a strong blow, like dry sea foam; and it cannot be discovered of what they are constructed ... They lay five eggs. (Pliny, *Natural History*, X.xlv.90-91)

Ceyx was also changed into a bird, but the love between the two remained. As far as I can ascertain, taxonomists still recognize both the genus *Halcyon* and the genus *Ceyx* amongst our kingfishers. In Australia, bird books still list *Ceyx azureus* as the azure kingfisher but our sacred kingfisher is no longer in the genus *Halycon*. In ancient times members of the two genera were commonly thought to fly together. The story of Alcyone led both Henry Purcell and Eric Coates to write musical pieces (*Halcyon Days*) on the theme. Perhaps we can take this as proof that birds continue to inspire us!

This early Greek notion of the human origin of many bird species has close parallels in other cultures. The totemic spirit ancestors of the Aborigines, for instance, were often bird-men. In their study of the Aranda of central Australia, Spencer and Gillen report that the spirit ancestors are so intimately associated with plants and animals, the names of which they bear, that an Alcheringa (Dreamtime or primordial time) man of say, the emu totem, may be spoken of either as a man-emu or emu-man. One can begin to understand from this, just how close was the relationship between the Australian Aborigines and the world of nature around them.

By the time we get to Plato (circa 400 BC), city folk are already losing interest in the bush and its denizens. As far as we know from Plato's account, Socrates only went voluntarily outside the city wall on one occasion and even then, it was not to admire the birds (*Phaedrus*). He seemed a lot more interested in a young boy (interestingly, *Sixty Minutes* has not followed up on this case). When he is asked about the spirits of nature, he gives this reply:

> Now I have no leisure for such enquiries; shall I tell you why? I must first know myself, as the Delphian inscription says; to be curious about that which is not my concern, while I am still in ignorance of my own self, would be ridiculous. And therefore I bid farewell to all this; the common opinion is enough for me. I am a lover of knowledge, and the men who dwell in the city are my teachers, and not the trees or the country.

But, of course, Plato is by no means divorced from the world of birds. Indeed, he supposes that the noblest of human souls can be re-incarnated in birds whereas less deserving souls will choose lower animals.

When we move into the Christian era, we can still find evidence of a close relationship between humans and birds. Consider, for example, the enormous popularity of the medieval "bestiary" (and the closely related "aviary"). These were collections of lore in animal allegory which serve to illustrate Christian ideas in a simple way such that they might have appeal (to those lower orders of the Church and the laity) where heavy theological treatises would not. The common ancestor of these medieval bestiaries is thought to be the *Physiologus*—a text

which may date back as early as the 2nd century AD and whose author is unknown. Here, each animal is given a chapter in which its physical and behavioural characteristics (real and imagined) are presented and moralised for a Christian audience. The later bestiaries of the medieval period follow this model, often drawing from a wide range of sources including the Bible itself, Aristotle, Pliny, and other Greek and Roman authors of antiquity.

That these works were designed to give moral instruction to the unlettered is made abundantly clear in the Prologue to Book One of Hugh of Fouilloy's *Aviarium* (circa 1150) where he says:

> Desiring to fulfill your wishes, dearest friend, I decided to paint the dove ... and by a picture to instruct the minds of simple folk, so that what the intellect of the simple folk could scarcely comprehend with the mind's eye, it might at least discern with the physical eye; and what their hearing could scarcely perceive, their sight might do so. I wished not only to paint the dove physically, but also to outline it verbally, so that by the text, I may represent a picture; for instance, whom the simplicity of the picture would not please, at least the moral teaching of the text might do so.

In the *Aviarium*, some thirty bird species are presented and, for each, certain biological information is used to draw an analogy to the proper conduct of a Christian life. Thus, for instance, part of the entry for "The Goose" reads:

> There are two varieties of geese, that is to say, the tame and the wild. The wild ones fly aloft and in an order, and denote those who, far from worldly affairs, preserve an order of righteous living. The domestic ones, however, live in villages; they cry out frequently; they tear at themselves with their beaks. They signify those who, even though they love the monastery, have time nevertheless for loquaciousness and slander.

Whether these moralizing allegories had the effect of giving heightened respect for animals is a difficult question. Certainly, many of the species chosen were farm animals, routinely slaughtered for food. It is difficult to imagine, however, that such a reverse anthropomorphism did not lead to some special consideration for the species involved. When the medieval peasants saw in the great Cathedral or Church, an image of the pelican (representing Christ—the pelican was thought to nourish its young with its own blood), it is hard to imagine that they could not have some lingering association when the real pelican was sighted on the lake.

In another sense, we know that the sort of associations given in these moralizing accounts went deeper than mere allegory. Even in this writer's memory of living in a small rural community in Victoria, it was considered improper (bringing bad luck at the very least) to destroy the nests of swallows, even when such nests on house walls caused a good deal of fouling with faecal remains. For a more powerful example, we need look no further than Coleridge's

Ancient Mariner, where the killing of an albatross has truly terrifying consequences. Nor is this mere poetic fancy. In Melville's *Moby Dick*, the author gives us (in a footnote) his actual experience on first sighting an Albatross at close quarters:

> I remember the first Albatross I ever saw. ... I saw a regal, feathery thing of unspotted whiteness, and with a hooked, Roman bill sublime. At intervals, it arched forth its vast archangel wings, as if to embrace some holy ark. Wondrous flutterings and throbbings shook it. Though bodily unharmed, it uttered cries, as some king's ghost in supernatural distress. Through its inexpressible, strange eyes, methought I peeped to secrets which took hold of God ... I cannot tell, can only hint, the things that darted through me then.

What Melville attempts to express here is an experience of the Numinous—what Professor Rudolph Otto calls the *ganz andere*—the "totally other". We should not suppose that such experiences came only with Enlightenment learning or Romanticism. It is much more likely that close encounters with living, wild animals have evoked these sorts of responses from time immemorial.

Not long ago, I read of a new report on the state of the environment in Australia. The outlook is not good. It is forecast that, by the end of this Century, Australia may have lost about half of the species of birds known to occur at the time of European settlement. No doubt, all sorts of valid scientific reasons will be put forward in support of this bleak forecast. Equally, the sorts of solutions proposed will be scientific solutions—ecosystem rehabilitation, and the like. I cannot help but wonder, though, whether the first requirement might simply be a return to that earlier sense of awe that we had for the feathered world. Birds were not just sophisticated bio-mechanical machines whose behaviour was genetically controlled. In my youth, the black-faced cuckoo shrike was called the "Summer bird", because when it appeared, you knew that summer had set in. Its appearance was a matter of good fortune, not of blind mechanical necessity. Likewise, the pallid cuckoo was the welcome harbinger of spring. It need not have come. Indeed, spring need not have come. And birds sang (these days they only vocalize) because they were happy or sad, or grateful, not because of some theory of B.F. Skinner or E.O. Wilson. Like the ancient Greeks, we did feel that birds had something to tell us. I suspect that, until we get back to such an understanding, none of the proposed scientific solutions will encourage the birds to return.

ENVIRONMENTAL PRIMITIVISM AND THE NOBLE SAVAGE

I have just received a greeting card from a good friend of mine in New Zealand. In place of the usual little quote from Ruskin, Omar Khayyam, or Helen Steiner Rice, is a short paragraph on environmental awareness. It is written in the Maori language, but fortunately an English translation is provided. It tells me that the earth and the sky, the animals and the birds are all my brothers and sisters. Now, of course, the use of such metaphors is highly commendable, but I am curious to know just why I need to be told how I should relate to nature by the Maoris rather than by people who share my own cultural heritage. Why is it that, in matters of environmental awareness, we need to be instructed, via suitable quotations, by American Indians, Maoris, Australian Aborigines, Kalahari Bushmen, and so on? For, in nearly all the messages concerning our need to improve environmental awareness, we are urged to follow the example of 'indigenous peoples'. I have yet to see an environmental policy statement from a government agency, one or other of the Christian Churches, or one or other of the environmental action groups, which quotes, say, Banjo Patterson (*And the bush has friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him)*. In fact, the Banjo is something of an anti-hero in certain quarters. David Tacey (*Edge of the Sacred*) describes him as "the great master of the art of cultural appropriation and psychological imperialism". True enough, the Romantic Poets are dragged from time to time and St Francis of Assisi occasionally gets a guernsey. Mostly though, it's tribal wisdom.

The truth of the matter is that Europeans are not to be trusted in nature because they rape and pillage the earth, whereas your indigenous peoples regard the earth as their mother and treat her with the greatest respect. That, at any rate, is the theory held by many of the ecologically sensitive people of my acquaintance. Never mind the fact that, for instance, the Maoris almost certainly wiped out the Moas in New Zealand (see *Prodigious Birds* by Atholl Anderson. Cambridge University Press, 1989), introduced the Pacific Rat, and converted a large part of the South Island from forest to tussock grassland. Likewise, it is a fair bet that the Australian Aborigines, over the course of thousands of years, drastically altered parts of the Australian environment by deliberate firing of the landscape.

We should not suppose that such a view of Europeans as the sole destroyers of nature is limited to the more lunatic fringe of the environmental movement. In my experience, it is widely held. For some years, I taught a small group of students studying some aspects of environmental science. I dealt only with plant and animal pests. At the first lesson each year, it was my habit to set the following question for the students: 'Humans are the greatest pest species on the planet! Do you agree or disagree? Please give your reasons'. The average class size each year was fifteen. Only in the cases of two or three students did anyone disagree, in principle, with the assertion made in my question. When I subsequently discussed this whole issue with the students, it usually transpired that 'indigenous peoples' were exempted from the general rule about humans. I suspect the situation is not all that different in the universities. Some offer a course called 'Outdoor Education' (it is not a hedge school!) in which a certain amount of environmental history is taught. For one such course, the recommended text was *Nature's Web*, by Peter Marshall. It is probably the most vehemently anti-Western and anti-Christian book I have read since my young student days when, as a payback for a hoax I had perpetrated on a friend, he signed me up for a swag of printed propaganda from a certain communist country. The whole history of the West, for Marshall, is simply a protracted account of the rape of Mother Nature by European Christianity. 'During the Christian centuries in Europe', Marshall says, 'nature became consigned to the Satanic order, and the Satanic forces working within nature became almost as real as the divine'. One wonders, idly, how bread and wine, the products of Satanic nature, could be transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ by some Medieval priest!

At this point, I can picture my incensed critics lacing up their bovver boots for a spot of Grievous Literary Harm. 'What! Does he really believe that indigenous peoples compare with modern Western man in the matter of environmental destruction'? Of course, I do not. I merely suggest that, by using indigenous people as role models in this way, we are doing an injustice both to them and to our own cultural heritage. What we have here is environmental primitivism. It is Rousseau's *Noble Savage* suitably reworked to serve certain environmental theories.

Environmental primitivism portrays tribal societies unjustly by supposing that they do not contribute to history in any way. At first glance, this seems a rather odd sort of charge to make, but it carries a good deal of weight. Consider, for instance, the environmental history of what we call the 'New World'. In popular accounts, such history nearly always begins with the first European entering a pristine, harmonious, ecosystem. Indeed, this is how we get the name 'New

World'—history begins at this point. As the American environmental commentator, Richard White has said; 'The first white man always enters an untouched paradise. The first white man must also be a *white man*.' (*Uncommon Ground: Towards Re-inventing Nature.* Ed. W. Cronon. Norton & Co., NY., 1995). The clear inference is that 'indigenous peoples' do not have the capacity to make changes or, in other words, to contribute to human history. They are locked into a sort of ecological matrix as part of an organic unity. As such, they have no greater capacity to effect environmental changes than, say, any one of the animal species they hunt. Before the white man comes, history (if it exists at all) is merely cyclical.

Post-Historic Primitivism

In fact, what we have embodied in this view of indigenous cultures is a modern yearning for what some writers refer to as 'post-historic primitivism'. They suppose that, for the earliest humans, there was no sense of separation between subject and object (i.e., self and the rest of the natural world). Thus, the primitive human would have regarded all existence as coterminous with his or her own—the boundary between 'self' and 'other' simply did not exist. This is sometimes described as 'mythic consciousness', but it is certainly not my understanding of what mythic consciousness entails. For the primitive human, in this view, there were no objects in the sense that we now conceive of them through the eyes of modern science. In this way, so the thesis goes, we can conceive of a situation where each individual carried within himself or herself, the whole world—a world of relationships. It is suggested by some modern environmental philosophers such as Max Oelschlaeger (*The Idea of Wilderness*) that a return to this mode of thinking about nature is the way out of our current dilemma. Just how someone living in the industrialised world might re-enter nature in this way is not explained. One has difficulties in imagining how some grey-suited executive, crouched over a computer in a glass and concrete jungle, or hurtling along a freeway, can reconnect to the *anima mundi*.

There are two aspects of such views worth considering in more detail. The first is the whole notion of human work in nature and the second is the human ability of self-transcendence—the reflective capacity of the human mind. Both of these factors, it seems to me, are almost totally ignored in environmental primitivism.

Work, Plenitude, and Edenic Leisure

On the matter of human work in nature, it is possible to identify several unwritten axioms of ecological correctness which apply to 'indigenous people'. In the first place, as Richard White points out, 'the original human relation with nature was one of leisure'. Here, of course, it is possible to see the influence of the account of the Fall in the *Book of Genesis*. In the New World, before the advent of whites, and in prehistoric Europe, work was unknown. Even without supermarkets, fruit and veg was nearly always available close at hand, and hunting of animals was a ritualised affair, quite unlike our modern notion of work. Life was just one big 'huntin', shootin', fishin'' holiday! I have just read a scholarly paper where the prehistoric hunter-gatherer is deemed to have lived in 'the original affluent society'. The first European intruders, as Richard White says, 'are the bearers of environmental original sin, because whites alone are recognised as labouring'. Human work is evil because it gives rise to environmental change.

Secondly, the ideal relationship between humans and their natural environment as regards human activity in nature is found only in hunter-gatherer societies or societies of nomadic herders. Tribes practicing sedentary agriculture or non-nomadic pastoralism are already on the downhill run towards modern, industrial society. Thus, for instance, a well-known American commentator on environmental history, Lynn White, supposes that the turning point in Western 'domination' of nature came with the invention of the scratch plough in the 7th century AD. Here again, it is tempting to suggest the influence of a certain Biblical theme—Cain, the agriculturalist, kills Abel, the herder of animals. Richard White rather neatly summarises the view of his namesake when he says that 'the popular notion that our environmental problems began with the invention of agriculture pushes the human fall from grace so far back into the past that all of civilised history becomes a tale of ecological declension.'

Now this 'fall' from original ecological harmony as a result of agriculture has another interesting aspect. The very idea of an 'Earth Mother' almost certainly has its genesis in agriculture. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade maintains that 'the symbolisms and cults of Mother Earth, of human and agricultural fertility, of the sacrality of woman, and the like, could not develop and constitute a complex religious system except through the discovery of agriculture'.

Thirdly, the harmonious ecological balance which characterised the New World before European infiltration was protected by certain taboos in the religious and social life of the indigenous human occupants of the land. Thus, for instance, in his depiction of Christianity as an anti-nature religion, Lynn White

supposes that, in earlier times, 'every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit.' Western civilisation, it is supposed, destroyed this pagan sanctification of nature and portrayed the world of nature simply as an aggregate of inert matter—a mere backdrop against which the whole drama of personal salvation was to be played out. 'By destroying pagan animism', Lynn White supposes, 'Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'.

The Great Wilderness Myth

Before European agricultural man sullied the world, the whole of nature lay in a state called 'wilderness'. This, according to environmental primitivism, is the perfect, aboriginal state of nature. And yet, when we look at the matter more closely, it is apparent that 'wilderness' is very much a creation of modern, industrial society. In a secular age like ours, the idea of wilderness performs much the same function as the idea of paradise in religious cultures. In fact, for many environmental historians, the concept of wilderness provides a principle of interpretation for all past history. Until a few centuries ago, history in the West was interpreted through Christian eschatology. With the increasing secularisation of society, various other principles of interpretation arose. Marxism was one, basing its interpretation on the dialectic of class conflict. Environmental primitivism is merely another, and more recent example. Fortunately, some of the more thoughtful environmental writers are now becoming aware of the wholly human construction of the idea of 'wilderness'.

Perhaps the best known and the most controversial is William Cronon, an American author whose writings have drawn heavy fire from the orthodox environmentalist camp. In an essay entitled *The Trouble with Wilderness,* he points out that: 'Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land'. The romantic ideology of wilderness as the standard against which to measure the failings of our human world is simply an untenable position to hold. As Cronon says: 'To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilisation, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honourable* human place in nature might actually look like'.

Positive Aspects of Human Work in Nature.

All of the above, of course, casts human work in a very poor light. In environmental primitivism, human work is that which separates us from nature and sets up the human-nature dichotomy. In fact, as Richard White points out, exactly the opposite is true. 'Work', he says, 'once bore the burden of connecting us with nature. In shifting much of this burden onto the various forms of play that take us back into nature, Americans have shifted the burden to leisure. And play cannot bear the weight.' And, of course, he is dead right. Work in nature offers us a fundamental way of 'connecting' with it. It is no accident that many of the great nature writers, early environmental activists, and ecologists, so lauded by the environmental primitivists were men and women who worked 'out bush'. Aldo Leopold was a forester and wildlife scientist and lived for many years on a farm on the Wisconsin River. John Muir was a geologist and explorer. Paul Errington, one of the father-figures in the science of animal ecology in America, started out as a fur trapper.

Richard White makes another very important point when he discusses modern recreation 'in nature'. The sorts of recreational activities that we feel bring us closest to nature are precisely those that mimic work—arduous walks or mountain climbs, whitewater canoeing, cross-country skiing, and so on. 'The most intense moments of our play in nature', he says, 'come when it seems to matter as much as work. We try to make play matter as if it were work, as if our lives depended on it. We try to know through play what workers in the woods, fields, and waters know through work'.

Environmental primitivism relegates tribal societies to the life of the *Lotos Eaters*, as depicted in Tennyson's famous poem. In short, their presence makes no difference. Without work, they are less than human. They lack substance, purpose, and history. They are a sort of epiphenomenon of vegetative nature—a self-expression of the lotus fruit. Homer quite rightly regards the lotus fruits as deadly poisonous—to eat of them was to 'think no more of home'.

Work in the Western Tradition

In the history of the West until recent times, human work in nature has always been regarded as a good thing. For instance, the idea of human artisans participating in or recapitulating the creation has deep roots in the Western Tradition. We can see its beginnings in Greek mythology with the story of Prometheus. After being charged with the duty to inspect the creation activities of Epimetheus, Prometheus sees that humans are in need of further means to

secure their existence. To effect this, he steals the mechanical arts of Hephaestus and Athena, and fire (without which the practice of these arts could not occur) and gives them to humans, a transgression for which he pays dearly. These new arts bequeathed to humans take the place of the natural protections and defenses granted to the animal world. They are, in effect, God-given. Here it is possible to see the genesis of the idea that humans can survive and perpetuate themselves only by applying their arts, tools and inventions to nature. The idea is taken further by Plato in his theory of craft, and this is of great importance because of its later influence in the application of Christian theology to the workplace.

In what has been called the Traditional Work Ethic, we see a particular Christian elaboration of Plato's theory of craft which endured from early Christian times to the end of the Medieval period. The artisan was here seen as being in a sort of reciprocal relationship with his or her raw material. There was, in fact, an affinity between them. Just as the worker required the material on which the work was done in order to achieve fulfilment (the idea of vocation or 'divine calling' in which each individual was to be given a particular task to contribute to 'the greater glory of God'), so the material required the worker if it too was to be fulfilled. The fulfilment of the material was thought of in terms of revealing hidden beauties or in some way exhibiting the highest nature of the material. In effect, the dictum of St James, 'faith without works is dead', was extended so that 'work without faith is also dead'. The latter idea, in a nutshell, describes our present condition and has rightly drawn criticism from the modern ecologists. Raw materials and processes are simply drained of all value save monetary value. As Richard White says, 'if work is not perverted into a means of turning place into property, it can teach us how deeply our work and nature's work are intertwined'.

Even in my own lifetime, I can remember a time when human work was regarded as a means of spiritual fulfilment. As a child I was taught by Catholic Nuns in a little country school, and we were always instructed to begin each new page of written work with the inscription AMDG *(Ad majorem Dei gloriam)*. I suspect it has now been replaced by 'Have a Nice Day', but then, I could be judging modern religious teachers too harshly.

It follows then, that in this earlier conception of human work to be found in the West, the material world could not be viewed with anything other than respect. The tree was not just inert matter or profane nature, but a means both of spiritual realisation for the woodworker and of exposing or realising the inherent beauties of nature itself as a mirror of God. To be sure, trees could be cut down

and metals mined from the earth. There was, however, a respect for the materials and proscriptions on the way in which they were used.

Today, one can still discern the remnants of this tradition. The sacrality of work persists, albeit in a rather debased form, in the idea of the hobby. Is it not in some way remarkable that men and women, after long hours in the factory or the office, still require some occupation where skill and artistry are rewarded not by money but by personal satisfaction? The popularity of hobbies is attested to by the enormous range of specialist hobby magazines one can find on the shelves of any newsagency. The tradition of improving upon or realising the full beauties of nature also persists in the form of the cultivated garden. Gardening remains as an immensely important recreational (that word reverberates with meaning) activity, again attested to by the sheer volume of contemporary literature on the subject and its popularity in other forms of media. When we put this with the general popularity of strenuous sports and 'outdoor education', we can see how far modern leisure activities laboriously imitate the simpler conditions of life in traditional societies. We imitate their civilisation, but our sophistication draws us away from nature, not into it.

The Trivialisation of Tribal Religion in Environmental Primitivism

The inability of tribal societies to contribute to history under the particular depiction of them given in environmental primitivism must ultimately stem from their inability to transcend their own consciousness. This, in turn, arises from the particular way in which their religiosity is construed. As Reinhold Neibuhr, points out, the human capacity for self-transcendence is precisely that which gives us true individuality as humans and also gives us the only vantage point from which the very concept of 'history' has any meaning. History itself does not supply us with any 'principles' of interpretation. We must supply these, and we can only supply them by reference to some vantage point above the flux of natural events. But environmental primitivism denies this to tribal societies because the only religion it allows them is a sort of nature worship. More often than not this is portrayed as a sort of animism—the whole of nature is imbued with some spiritual quality so that every tree, rock, and river is 'sacred'. So, for instance, we can refer back to Lynn White's quote: 'by destroying pagan animism Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects'.

But in my admittedly limited reading on tribal religions (restricted to American Plains Indians and Australian Aborigines), I do not find this to be the case. In fact, only certain 'special' objects or places are regarded as having spiritual energies. In

the case of the Australian Aborigines, for instance, we have the *tjurunga* (or *churinga*) — a sacred object which is a sort of receptacle of spiritual energies of a spirit-ancestor. Certain localities are also deemed sacred. In F.J. Gillen and Balwyn Spencer's account of the Aranda Aborigines of Central Australia, particular items in the landscape mark the spot where the Spirit Ancestors went underground, or emerged from the earth, or performed certain ceremonies, etc. In other words, there are qualitative differences in places; some are sacred, some are not. I vaguely remember a story told by Jack Absalom regarding a trip he did with an Aboriginal elder in the outback—I hope Jack will forgive my failing memory. The gist of the account is that the old Aborigine was pointing out significant features of the landscape as they travelled along—these rocks are where the Spirit Ancestors went into the earth, etc. Upon coming over a small rise in Jack's truck, there arose before them a huge rock of a most striking aspect. Jack was enormously impressed and asked his guide to provide some information: 'Wow! What's this Jimmy'? The old Aborigine looked at him rather strangely and said: 'that's a bloody rock Jack'.

Any suggestion that tribal humans might aspire to a reality beyond the material realm cannot be countenanced because belief in a higher reality would hint at a certain duality in human nature and such a situation is hateful to their purpose. It provides for the possibility that tribal religions are, in this respect, similar to Judeo-Christianity. But, as Eliade points out in *The Sacred and the Profane*, 'the man of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible in the sacred or in close proximity to consecrated objects'. In other words, 'archaic man' (for Eliade, 'archaic' does not mean 'primitive' but rather 'traditional' or 'not of the modern, secular culture') is always aware of an order of reality above that of mere material nature. This is absolutely clear in the accounts of the religion of the Plains Indians and the Australian Aborigines. They quite obviously have a notion of another realm of existence and their shamanism would make little sense without such a notion. Moreover, for the Aborigines, the whole idea of the Dreamtime presupposes a realm of existence quite outside the temporal order of the material world in which they live. It is primordial time.

There is another tendency, common in environmental primitivism, to regard tribal humans as being without a sense of sin or wrongdoing. Just as Nietzsche thought of his *Übermensch* as having ascended 'beyond good and evil', the primitivist thinks of tribal humans as being below good and evil. They are, in other words, more or less deprived of free will. If they are construed merely as part of that organic unity called nature, then everything they do is 'natural'. This position is never actually stated, but it is implied. Thus, for instance, it is common

enough to hear as some defense of say, infanticide, that 'we must try to understand these things from their cultural perspective'. The postmodern, relativistic view is that concepts such as right and wrong are entirely based in culture and have no absolute validity. But if tribal humans cannot be 'blamed' or held accountable for their actions, then we treat them exactly as we treat cows and kangaroos. In order to show just how incredibly tolerant we are, we automatically downgrade tribal humans to a lower category of existence. It is no defense against this racism that we have already done the same thing to ourselves.

There is such a thing as institutionalised evil, but it is only found in the West. Slavery was once 'part of the culture' in America, and we rightly condemn it. We sometimes have a different set of standards, though, for things like genital mutilation, infanticide, cannibalism, abandonment of the elderly, and human sacrifices, when they occur in tribal societies. They are part of the 'cultural heritage' of the tribe. The environmental primitivists, of course, simply ignore these issues and selectively highlight those aspects of tribal society which suit their purpose. It is precisely *because* the tribal man or woman can be accused of wrongdoing that they are made truly human, truly our brothers and sisters.

Now of course, when one takes the trouble to read accounts of tribal religion, it is very clear that the concept of right and wrong is well known and well understood. It will suffice here to mention just one instance of such a judgement, taken from Black Elk's account of the gift of the Sacred Pipe to the Oglala Sioux Indians. The bearer of the Sacred Pipe is a beautiful young spirit-woman, and she appears before two scouts who are looking for bison. One of the scouts, seeing the woman, 'had bad thoughts', which he immediately expresses to his companion. The other scout admonishes him, but to no avail. The two men are suddenly engulfed by a white cloud. When it dissipates, the scout who 'had bad thoughts' is a skeleton covered with worms.

The trivialisation of tribal religion by the environmental primitivists is generally masked by a sort of syrupy rhetoric and wholly false adulation for the 'ancient wisdom' of such societies. When they praise the American Indians or the Australian Aborigines for their spiritual affinity with nature and, at the same time, deny any transcendence in their own spiritual legacy they *ipso facto* deny all forms of transcendence and empty all forms of religious belief. The Rainbow Serpent or the Sky Spirits then simply become a means by which human evolutionary developments in the dim past 'imprint' good environmental behaviour. They are useful superstitions, serving to impart, quite unconsciously, good environmental behaviour in the otherwise ignorant.

Sadly, many people within the Christian churches themselves often seem not to be aware of all this and, indeed, it is they as much as anyone else who praise the environmental wisdom of tribal societies and condemn their own past. Perhaps they do so in ignorance of what harm such a depiction does to both tribal religions and to Christianity itself. It is surely something of an irony that, while the remnants of Western Christianity are busily engaged in making themselves more 'relevant' to the modern world, the modern Western world itself, through environmental commentators like Richard White and William Cronon, is now having some misgivings about the whole project of deprecating its past history and its religious heritage. One has the distinct sense of modern Christianity unfurling its sails and lifting anchor to catch the fleet, only to find, once they are out on the stormy seas, that the fleet has returned to the home port after a long and uncomfortable circumnavigation of the idea of being 'human'.

THE EMPTY GRAIL

Sir James Frazer and *The Golden Bough*

The title of this essay is not original. It was used many years ago by Bernard Levin to describe the artistic merits of the pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood ('I have never seen paint spread so thick to make a picture so thin'). He went on to describe a cartoon by Max Beerbohm in which Queen Victoria looks at a painting of the Grail Quest by Rossetti and says 'But what were they going to do with the Grail when they found it"? Levin thought he had the answer—they were going to drink their cocoa out of it! That sort of the trivialisation of a religious symbol, so despised by Levin, is precisely the outcome which was to follow in the wake of Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*—a monumental work on the history of magic and religion which first appeared in two volumes in 1890 and, finally, in twelve volumes in 1915. It was instantly acclaimed as a classic and had a huge influence throughout the Western world. Today it can still be found in most large academic and public libraries and it is still regularly consulted by scholars from a remarkably wide range of disciplines. Many is the ignorant postgraduate student who has requested *The Golden Bough* on interlibrary loan and then finds, to his or her dismay, that a wheelbarrow is needed to get it home.

The Golden Bough is a work of prodigious scholarship which occupied Frazer for the greater part of his working life. It began as quite a limited study on the Grove of Nemi in ancient Italy where the priest, the 'King of the Wood', had to slay his predecessor in order to take up his role. Gradually, the study expanded to involve the association of ideas from aspects of 'primitive' magic and religion throughout the world. Frazer was perhaps the first anthropologist to look for parallels in the religious customs of widely disparate peoples. He was also a master of narrative technique and anyone who picks up a volume of *The Golden Bough* cannot fail to be drawn in by his style. Here, for example, is the way in which he opens his mammoth account after introducing us briefly to the lake of Nemi and its sacred grove (I quote from the one volume, abridged edition):

> In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might seem to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant, he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later

> to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary.

He has a way of giving to some obscure magical belief or religious custom, a sort of gripping immediacy. In a chapter entitled 'The Magical Control of the Weather', he recounts how Finnish wizards used to sell wind to storm-stayed mariners. The wind was enclosed in three knots (presumably on a short cord). When the first knot was undone, a moderate wind ensued; the second gave a gale, the third a hurricane (shades of Odysseus and the bag of wind from Aeolus, sealed with a knot in a burnished silver wire). Frazer then clinches his account with this memorable paragraph:

> It is said, too, that sailors, beating up against the wind in the Gulf of Finland, sometimes see a strange sail heave in sight astern and overhaul them hand over hand. On she comes with a cloud of canvas—all her studding-sails out—right in the teeth of the wind, forging her way through the foaming billows, dashing back the spray in sheets from her cutwater, every sail swollen to bursting, every rope to strained to cracking. The sailors know that she hails from Finland

There are two other things to notice about Frazer's writing style. Firstly, he appears to be very sympathetic towards his material and, secondly, related to this apparent sympathy is a sort of 'inclusiveness', a determination to give us the marvellous, the fanciful, and the frankly magical, along with the 'hard facts'. And so, in the quote above, the strange case of the magical ship from Finland is included with the 'facts' concerning the actual practice of magic by Finnish wizards. In this way, Frazer comes across as being totally open-minded—he will not hide any facets of some religious or magical ceremony even though they weaken his underlying argument and empirical approach to his subject.

Incredible as it may seem, Frazer did not travel widely in search of his raw material but, rather, relied on correspondents to supply him with data. Much of his material on customs of various tribes was obtained through questionnaires to missionaries, administrators, doctors, etc in the far flung corners of the Empire. This fact leads to one of the real problems with his study—his interpretations are twice removed from the subject matter. The case of Margaret Meade, to quote just one example, ought to teach us that the accurate portrayal of local tribal customs, religious beliefs, etc. is fraught with difficulty. The outsiders are often told what the informants think they want to hear. On other occasions, the real beliefs of the tribe are simply withheld. That much underrated Australian anthropologist, A.P. Elkins put the matter very nicely, and he is worth quoting at some length:

> There are many white folk who are said to be great authorities on the Aborigines. I have frequently been told to consult them, but ever and anon I came out by the same door by which I went in. ….It may seem surprising to be told that a settler, missionary, policeman or settlement manager can spend years and years amongst such an apparently primitive type of people as the Aborigines, and yet know very little of importance about them, but it is a fact, and no one knows it better than the Aborigines themselves. But such is their loyalty to their secrets, that they never drop a hint to the white "authority" of the great world of thought, ritual and sanction of which he is unaware. They feel either that he would not understand it or that he would despise it, and so the "past-masters", the old custodians of secret knowledge sit in the camp, sphinx-like, watching with eagle eye the effect of white contact on the young men, and deciding how much, if any, of the knowledge of their fathers can be safely entrusted to them, and just when the imparting of the secrets can be effectively made. If the young men are too much attracted to the white man's ways, if they are inclined to despise the old ways, and above all if they show a looseness of living which denotes lack of stability in character, the old men either teach them nothing, or else traditional false versions of some myths as a means of testing their sincerity and loyalty. But only too often, after contact with the white man, the time is never propitious for the imparting of "truth", and so the secrets pass away with the old men; and though the latter die in sorrow knowing that the old rites and myths will pass into oblivion, that the sacred places will no longer he cared for, and that the tribe is doomed to extinction, yet they die triumphantly, having been loyal to their trust.

Running through Frazer's account is the general thesis, no doubt influenced by Darwinism, that one sees over the millennia of recorded history a gradual progression from magic through religion, to modern science:

> If then we consider, on the one hand, the essential similarity of man's chief wants everywhere and at all times, and on the other hand, the wide difference between the means he has adopted to satisfy them in different ages, we shall perhaps be disposed to conclude that the movement of the higher thought, so far as we can trace it, has on the whole been from magic through religion to science

The advance of thought comes through disillusionment. Primitive man believes in a certain established order of nature which he can manipulate for his own ends (through magic). When he discovers his mistake and recognises that both the order of nature which he had assumed and the control which he had believed himself to exercise over it were purely imaginary, he ceases to rely on his own intelligence and throws himself humbly on the mercy of certain great

invisible beings 'which explains the succession of natural phenomena as regulated by the will, the passion, or the caprice of spiritual beings like man in kind, though vastly superior to him in power.'

In this way, magic is superseded by religion. But religion, in turn, is also found wanting. Upon closer examination, nature appears to conform to immutable laws and one can find no evidence for the intervention of spiritual beings. The situation, in some sense, is that of the magician's again. An established order of nature is indeed postulated, but now, we do not attempt to manipulate it through magic, but rather to predict its workings. In short, religion, regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by science. This allows us to predict the course of natural events with a degree of certainty and to act or intervene accordingly.

As I suggested earlier in this essay, one claim often made for Frazer's work is what we might call its *openness* or *inclusiveness*. In presenting and interpreting his data, Frazer does not attempt to make it fit any preconceived ideology. Indeed, sometimes he offers more than one possible explanation and at other times he will make no explanation at all. At one level, this is undoubtedly true. But we tend to forget that Frazer comes to his work with two very important, pre-existing notions and it is these which furnish him with what I will call the 'principles of interpretation' for the mass of data before him. The first is the notion of progress—the gradual rise of humankind from some savage origins through the stages of magic and religion to reach the present era where rational, objective science was to be its main guide. Clearly, this principle is directly related to Darwin's evolutionary theory, but Frazer also supposes that modern 'civilized', man is not entirely free of these past illusions and misunderstandings, so that he is still encumbered with the remnants of magic and religious practices from the past. This sober realization tends to moderate his view of the progress of humankind, but nonetheless it seems pretty clear that he believed in a slow ascent from superstition and fear to objective truth via unaided human reason.

This brings us to the second and closely related idea that Frazer brings to *The Golden Bough*. There is, for Frazer, no possibility of an order of reality beyond that available to the human senses and to human reasoning. This principle is absolutely essential for his study. Without it, he cannot compare widely differing religious practices and find for them, some common explanatory 'fact'. He can stand above the material to be analysed and, from that 'Pisgah of the mind', as he puts it, subject it to the clear light of human reason. For him, then, all magical or religious practices must have their origins in a physical object or a physical event, be it birth, death, the waxing and waning of the moon, or the growth and decay of vegetation.

That Frazer should have begun his task with these two preconceptions of progress and empiricism without even contemplating the possibility of their subjective nature is entirely understandable. The age into which Frazer was born had already developed and assimilated such views and they formed the general background for much of the intellectual activity of the age. A huge range of books then formed what one commentator has rather nicely called 'dissolvent literature'—works which, whether deliberately or not, called into question long held traditions and religious beliefs. Many examples come to mind, but it will suffice here to mention just one—Ernest Renan's hugely popular work on the historical Jesus. This, indeed, was a forerunner and role model for all manner of later `Jesus theories'—magic mushrooms, outer space visitations, and so on. In a sense then, *The Golden Bough* came at the very time when the *Zeitgeist* was wholly receptive to it. But this, of course, is true of most hugely popular works. They strike a chord because they seem to condense or in some way focus the prevailing opinions and fashions and, in so doing, to validate them. We read them and say to ourselves "Of course that's how it must be. It is all so obvious. Why didn't someone think of this before now"?

But, for all that, Frazer is by no means a true Enlightenment thinker. By the time he was to complete his massive study, a degree of what I will call 'noble hopelessness' is very evident in his writing. He has grave reservations about the whole human enterprise. Consider these remarkable passages at very end of the final volume of *The Golden Bough (A* Farewell to Nemi*)*:

> It is time to part. Yet before we do so we may well ask ourselves whether there is not some more general conclusion, some lesson, if possible, of hope and encouragement to be drawn from the melancholy record of human error and folly which has engaged our attention in this book. [*Frazer goes on to suggest that the advance of science may give us cause for hope, but*] …the history of thought should warn us against concluding that because the scientific theory of the world is the best that has yet been formulated, it is necessarily complete and final. …the laws of nature are merely hypotheses devised to explain that ever-shifting phantasmagoria of thought which we dignify with the high-sounding names of the world and the universe. In the last analysis magic, religion, and science are nothing but theories of thought; and as science has supplanted its predecessors, so it may hereafter be itself superseded by some more perfect hypothesis…. The advance of knowledge is an infinite progression towards a goal that forever recedes [*nonetheless*]….great things will come of that pursuit. ... But a dark shadow lies athwart the far end of this fair prospect ….. man… can scarcely hope to stay the sweep of those great forces which seem to be making

> silently but relentlessly for the destruction of all this starry universe in which our earth swims as a speck or mote. … Yet the philosopher who trembles at the idea of such distant catastrophes may console himself by reflecting that these gloomy apprehensions, like the earth, and the sun themselves, are only part of that unsubstantial world which thought has conjured up out of the void… .

Here is an extraordinary change of heart! The Frazer of 1890 sets out on his journey with a clear notion of the goal:

> If we can show that a barbarous custom, like that of the priesthood at Nemi, has existed elsewhere; if we can detect the motives which led to its institution; if we can prove that these motives have operated widely .in human society…producing …a variety of institutions ….generically alike …then we may fairly infer that at a remoter age the same motives gave birth to the priesthood of Nemi.

But, in the end, all is folly. There is no truth, no answer to be had. The very earth itself may simply be a product of the human mind *a la* Berkeley. Then, in the very last paragraph of his massive work, he gives us his final vision of the Grove of Nemi:

> Our long voyage of discovery is over and our bark has drooped her weary sails in port at last. Once more we take the road to Nemi. It is evening, and as we climb the long slope of the Appian Way up to the Alban Hills, we look back and see the sky aflame with sunset, its golden glory resting like the aureole of a dying saint over Rome and touching with a crest of fire the dome of St. Peter's. The sight once seen can never be forgotten, but we turn from it and pursue our way darkling along the mountain side, till we come to Nemi and look down on the lake in its deep hollow, now fast disappearing in the evening shadows. The place has changed but little since Diana received the homage of her worshippers in the sacred grove. The temple of the sylvan goddess, indeed, has vanished and the King of the Wood no longer stands sentinel over the Golden Bough. But Nemi's woods are still green, and as the sunset fades above them in the west, there comes to us, borne on the swell of the wind, the sound of the church bells of Aricia ringing the Angelus. *Ave Maria!* Sweet and solemn they chime out from the distant town and die lingeringly away across the wide Campagnan marshes. *Le roi est mort, vive le roi! Ave Maria!*

What we see here in Frazer is a quality of stoical resignation. Our whole history is a 'melancholy record of human error and folly'. There is no hope or reaching any bedrock of truth or of averting error. We are doomed to a state of subjectivity. Nonetheless, life is good, the earth is beautiful, etc., etc. and we must face up to things with a degree of stoical good-heartedness. This is expected of a

British gentleman of learning, who proves his breeding by his acceptance of such hard 'facts'. And, so, that priest at Nemi, originally cast as an ignorant savage, is really no better or worse than us. All we have done is to substitute one god for another so that, with the distant peal of the Angelus bell, we can say 'The king is dead. Long live the king'.

The note of hopelessness is, of course, a symptom of the whole age in which Frazer lived. We can see it in many of his famous contemporaries—Thomas Hardy, Matthew Arnold, Freud, and a rather extreme example in Nietzsche The initial enthusiasm engendered by the Enlightenment P*hilosophes* had, by this time, run out of steam. The perfectibility of man was no longer even a distant prospect. By the time Frazer's abridged edition came out in 1922, a whole generation of youth had perished in the Great War and, with them, the last vestige of hope for the perfection of humankind.

In Frazer's case we can, I think, see how this process of disillusionment has come about. When you begin with the premise that all spiritual matters must have some non-spiritual explanation, then the process of enquiry is much like that of peeling an onion. As each layer of 'superstition and fear' is removed, one has the illusion of getter closer to the truth. Alas, at the end, one is left merely with empty shells—and tears! The tears come because one suddenly realizes that, in demystifying the belief systems in this inexorable process of enquiry, one's own vantage point is no less prone to attack. And so, if the 'King of the Woods' has a simple explanation in human error and ignorance, so does the position occupied by the present regent of England. How could Frazer suppose that Queen Victoria was any different to that priest-king at Nemi? Indeed, we can go further. What, for example, did Frazer think of his own knighthood, conferred in 1914? Was this not simply an extension of some 'savage ritual'? The knights of old, so we are told on very good authority, are merely ancient Celtic figures clothed in the decent draperies of medieval Christianity. So, for instance, that great Grail scholar Arthur Loomis, following Frazer, can trace the Grail legend back to ancient pagan ceremonies and thereby deconstruct it:

> In the presence of these facts, does it require any assurances from adepts or occultists to convince us that the question form of the test [*the test of the Grail hero*] is a sexual initiation ceremony? Or that the Bleeding Spear and the Grail stand for the male and female principles? Or that the secrets of the Grail were in all probability a solemn doctrine regarding the universal mystery of reproduction and its human application? Perhaps the virginity of the Grail hero, so stressed by late Christian redactors, may be a reminiscence of the virgin state of the initiate in the pagan ceremonial.

In this fashion, the whole of our belief system and our culture is laid bare and destroyed. The Great Apollo becomes, finally, just a circus act or, in literary guise, the Mr Apollonax of T.S. Eliot. The extraordinary ease with which we have fallen into this way of thinking is everywhere apparent. Thus, for example, in dealing with the sacred springs and rivers of ancient Greece, the great classical scholar, W.R. Halliday, supposes that 'the reason for the sanctity of rivers in Greece is largely to be sought in the value naturally attaching to water in a dry and thirsty land ...'. Again, when he wishes to explain the origins of astronomy in ancient Greece, D.R. Dicks, another well-known classical scholar, supposes that the stars assumed their religious significance amongst 'earliest cavemen' because they engendered a feeling of awe and wonder and, therefore, needed some explanation. The possibility of an order of reality beyond the scope of the human mind is simply out of the question.

In a 2004 book entitled *Homer on Immortality*, my colleague, the late Roger Sworder from La Trobe University in Bendigo, draws our attention to a remarkable anomaly:

> It is odd that the study of ancient Greek religion should have fallen under the discipline of anthropology and not of theology. Should the study of ancient Greek religion, or indeed of any religion, be part of the study of man rather than of God?

Sworder then goes on to quote a little known passage from the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, arguably the greatest philosopher of the 20th Century:

> Frazer is much more savage than most of his savages, because these won't be as far from understanding spiritual matters as an English man of the twentieth century. His explanations of primitive customs are much cruder than the meaning of these customs themselves.

In 1931, at the very height of his power and fame, Sir James Frazer was invited to deliver the address at the Royal Literary Fund. In the middle of his delivery he was suddenly struck blind in both eyes and they filled with blood. Now it may be that, unlike the *Juju* men or the *Kadaitja* men, who are Frazer's subject of enquiry, we do not suppose such action to have come from the vengeful gods. Nonetheless, like William Blake, we might see in it something of what he called 'Fearful Symmetry'. Frazer, after all, was perhaps one of the last great literary figures to appear in the dying days on the Enlightenment—that great hope for a total vision when the dark glass of superstition and religion was to be cast aside. Alas, like Frazer's eyes, its progressively failing vision was finally extinguished in the mud of Flanders, amongst the rotting corpses of the dead and the shattered hopes of the living. The Waste Land had indeed come and T.S. Eliot was there

to describe its lineaments to us. But the Grail Hero who might heal the Fisher King and his lands was dead. He had been killed by *The Golden Bough*.

Levin's scorn for the pre-Raphaelites, with which this piece began, included a litany of shortcomings and I might invoke the same in the case of Frazer's work. Despite its brilliance, there is no feeling, only calculation, no heart, only thought, no passion, only assiduity, no vigour, only force, no love, only desire, no humility, only discretion, no God, only religion, and no understanding only knowledge. To this litany of condemnations, I would add two of my own—no Tradition, only custom, and no hope, only resignation.

T.S. ELIOT, MODERNISM AND TRADITION

In my end is my beginning
(Mary, Queen of Scots)

Background

Before discussing aspects of the life and work of T.S. Eliot and its connection to both the Western Tradition and to the Modernist movement, it would be useful to consider the sorts of tradition-related issues confronting the young Eliot as he began his intellectual and literary journey. For his historical setting—the immediate post-war years, after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919—were not dissimilar to ours today. Indeed, it might well be said that we have simply wandered further into the heart of the Wasteland and, despite our supposed scientific progress since the early 20th C, the self-inflicted wounds of the Fisher King grow ever more gangrenous and the location of the Chapel Perilous ever more obscure, Google Maps notwithstanding.

And so, some of the 'Big Questions' confronting us no doubt confronted Elliot as well. He was, after all, well read in philosophy and religion as well as in the Classics. What does it mean to say you are a traditionalist? Can you be a traditionalist without embracing a particular tradition? If so, does not this suggest that you have some superior vantage point outside and above the various traditions? But there is no "God's eye view" for humans. As the later Wittgenstein pointed out, meaning itself can only occur within what he called a 'language game' or a particular tradition. To put it another way, you cannot derive truth from abstract first principles—from some exercise of reason or logic.

The whole problem of deciding exactly what is entailed by the term 'tradition' was nicely (but rather severely) summarised by the great Muslim scholar Al Ghazali a thousand years ago:

> There is no hope of returning to a traditional faith after it has once been abandoned, since the essential condition in the holder of a traditional faith is that he should not know he is a traditionalist.

Perhaps Ghazali overstates the case, but each of us knows, deep down, there is some truth in what he says.

On the other hand, those who reject each and every tradition must have some alternative position upon which to base such a rejection. And so, their incredulity towards this or that tradition is limited, in effect, to metanarratives written by

others, but not to those written by themselves. Their own metanarrative, which is the tradition of anti-tradition, is sacrosanct.

They may of course, simply opt for something like Richard Rorty's pragmatism—forget about the concept of truth and just get on with enjoying life by applying whatever principles seem to work. This seems to be the current position, after all, and it was the position of many of Eliot's circle of acquaintances. Many years ago, at a conference in Poland, Ernest Gellner and Leszek Kolakowski put the question to Rorty as to whether such an attitude could maintain civil society over the long term. Rorty's answer was that, as long as the money and the good times prevail, then we do not need any traditional belief system to serve as some bedrock of truth—we could get by without the notion of truth altogether. Bread and circuses—with a bit of Mozart and other high *culcher*—would suffice. It was hardly a resounding recommendation for pragmatism! But let us suppose that the good times *are* a permanent feature of our society and that, under modern secularism, we are also getting more and more 'humane' (this is Steven Pinker's thesis for which he was showered with rewards and praise, even to the extent of being asked to present the Gifford Lecture in 2013).

We are then faced with the problem of explaining the huge increase in rates of suicide and depression in modern secularised societies in the past few decades. Even in Eliot's day, the prevailing post-war mood was one of *ennui* and we recall those lines from *The Wasteland*:

> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.
> Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
> And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Our own times are similarly dark. For instance, there were 5.5 million community pharmacy prescriptions for antidepressants in Australia in 1990, and 8.1 million in 1998. The Beyond Blue website offers detailed and disturbing data on rates of suicide and clinical depression in Australia. In short, why is it that the supposed 'release' from 'stifling' religious dogma and morality failed to make us happier? For it is difficult to argue with Aristotle's claim that the end of all human activity is happiness.

We are faced also, with the obvious breakdown of the old liberal-democratic order (already tottering in Eliot's day), where the general operation of J.S. Mills 'no harm' principle and the cult of the individual has clearly failed, such failure being recognised by both left and right-leaning political camps. It is a strange world, where the disciples of Neo-reaction (Mencius Moldbug comes to mind) find themselves in the same camp as the conservative religious believers and even

old-fashioned socialists. The cult of the individual, engendered by Mill's philosophy, has led to a sort of Twitter and Facebook-led autarky, where each person contests with every other, wielding 'armed doctrine and consuming appetite' (to quote Eliot himself, writing long before the iPhone and the one-finger culture warriors). After all of the tumult and shouting, the modern world, which announced itself with Descartes "*Cogito ergo sum*", has finally arrived at the endpoint of that philosophical revolution with a revised Cartesian motto—"*Copulo ergo sum*". Eliot saw this long before most others.

At the end of the day, the real division between traditionalists and their opponents is really a division between those who believe that human nature is a given and those who believe it is merely a social construct.

Let us remember too, that the Western Tradition, which Eliot fiercely defended for most of his adult life, is now under direct attack via the notion of 'the global community'. There is an exaggerated notion of 'pluralism' in which any tradition or non-tradition is as good as any other—except the Western Tradition, which is to be denounced and traduced.

It is a world perfectly described by the Scottish-born philosopher Alasdair MacIntrye in his now famous book, *After Virtue*. A moral order, with its attendant metaphysical base, which had come down to us from the time of Plato and Aristotle, is now in tatters. It has been replaced not by some more equitable or efficient system (despite the efforts of secularists like John Rawls), but rather by a shallow emotionalism. How strange, and yet how fitting that the 'emotivist' label, placed on all traditional belief systems by the Logical Positivists (especially A.J Ayer) should turn out to describe not the traditional believers, but their enemies, Ayer included.

Tradition and The Young Eliot

First, some brief background on Eliot's early years. It is not my purpose here to give a potted biography of Eliot. There are now several biographies available for those interested. My own research on Eliot has mainly been via Russell Kirk's *Eliot and his Age*, published in 1972. I have supplemented this with information gleaned from several BBC television documentaries (now on YouTube) involving people like Stephen Spender (who, like Kirk, knew Eliot and corresponded with him), Frank Kermode—a leading 20th C literary critic, and Craig Raine, who published a book on Eliot in 2007. For a background to Eliot's *Four Quartets*, I have relied on Prof. Thomas Howard's account in *Dove Descending* (2006). I have deliberately made such a narrow selection for two reasons. The first is simply a consideration of time—no one person could now

wade through the prodigious volumes of *Eliotana* in a single lifetime. Secondly, many books come pre-armed with an agenda to 'do down' Eliot—Eliot the misogynist, Eliot the closet homosexual, Eliot the anti-Semite, and so on. And of course I dare not venture to do a Google search with the two words 'Eliot' and 'gender' linked. I daresay there is now a huge industry in Eliot 'gender analysis'. What rich pickings are to be had! Somewhere, there will be a 'scholarly' paper linking *Macavity the Mystery Cat* to gender dysphoria or some such.

Suffice then, to say that Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St Louis in 1888 of rather pious but prosperous parents, who were members of the Unitarian Church. He had a happy boyhood and schooling and, in 1906, departed for Harvard university. There he came under the tutelage of figures such as Irving Babbitt, George Santayana, and Josiah Royce, to name but three.

No doubt, like many young men and women before and after him, myself included, he reached that point in his understanding of the world where the old certainties of faith were either insufficient or insufficiently understood, to cope with what he was now learning as an undergraduate. He certainly never completely abandoned his Christianity, but he did subject it to scrutiny and, almost certainly, entertained serious doubts. As it happened, Babbitt was interested in the Indic religions and he persuaded the young Eliot that his graduate studies should be in that area. Although he was later to abandon those studies, they gave him a sort of vantage point from whence he could now re-examine his own religious tradition in a new light. Later in life, he was to make this observation:

> A good half of the effort of understanding what the Indian philosophers were after—and their subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys—lay in trying to erase from my mind all the categories and kinds of distinction common to European philosophy from the time of the Greeks.

But he was acutely aware of the dangers of religious syncretism and, though at this time his Christian faith was 'on the back burner' as they say, he could not walk away from it. For another thing, that faith was intimately bound to the Western Tradition itself, especially its literary tradition, and this meant everything to Eliot. It might be, indeed, that whatever doubts he had regarding his own tradition were exactly what was needed to proceed to a fuller understanding of that tradition in the manner of John Donne:

> …doubt wisely; in strange way
> To stand inquiring right, is not to stray;
> To sleep, or run wrong, is. On a huge hill,

Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must and about must go,
And what the hill's suddenness resists, win so.

And, in the fullness of time, Eliot did conquer his mountain and gave us a moving testimony of the journey in *Four Quartets*, but more about that later.

The young Eliot's arrival in England was an unplanned consequence of the outbreak of the First World War (we must be careful not to call it "The Great War", as there was nothing great about it). Here we must pass over his early and disastrous marriage to Vivienne Haigh Wood, noting only that, without the anguish occasioned to both parties, we may not have been given *The Wasteland* or *Prufrock*, or indeed, the *Four Quartets*.

Bloomsbury and The Modernist Fraternity

One of his first attempts to earn a crust was as an assistant teacher at Highgate Junior School. Here a young boy handed Elliot an exercise book of poems he had written. The handwritten book was titled 'John Betjeman's Best Poems'! Later, Eliot found a lowly clerical job at Lloyd's Bank. There is a description of him somewhere, sitting at his desk in a basement. Above him, part of the ceiling was comprised of green glass bricks, these forming a section of pavement for a city footpath. Here the indeterminate shadows of men and women passed above him—shadows on the wall of Plato's cave. It was, in its own stark way, a fitting sort of setting for the author of *the Wasteland*.

With the publication of *Prufrock* in 1915 and the *Wasteland* in 1922, he was immediately adopted by some members of the Bloomsbury set as their darling, and became a member of the new Modernist movement in literature, spearheaded by Wyndam Lewis and Ezra Pound. However, the young Eliot was a very different kettle of fish to people like Virginia Woolf and Lady Ottoline Morell. He might have been grateful for their help, but he did not share most of their views. The inimitable Dorothy Parker summed up the Bloomsbury set in one magnificent sentence: "They lived in squares, painted in circles and loved in triangles". I probably would have said that they loved in polyhedrons. The typical sort of upper class English aesthete was marvellously portrayed by Eliot as "Sir Epicure Mammon"—a name borrowed from "Rare" Ben Jonson (in his play, *The Alchemist*).

We must, at this point, draw a distinction between the words 'Modernism' and 'modernity'. The former was an artistic and literary movement seeking only to break with the *immediate* past in literary and artistic style, whereas the latter simply refers to something like 'the spirit of the age', that 'spirit' being essentially

the idea of progress—of continual human improvement in *every* sphere. Many of the Modernists disliked modernity, perhaps none more so than Ezra Pound (one only needs to read his *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, or his tirades against usury).

With *Prufrock* and *The Wasteland*, Bloomsbury (and some of the Modernists) assumed that Eliot shared their disillusionment with the old order and, especially with the old morality. But as Chesterton has pointed out, in order to be disillusioned, one first needs to be 'illusioned'. Eliot was anything but illusioned. *The Wasteland*, after all, only arises when the Fisher King is wounded. It awaits only the correct answer by the questing knight in order to begin the process of repair. And the correct answer, for Eliot, was there in the perennial philosophy. It was now only a question of deciding which particular setting was needed for that philosophy. For, as I explained earlier, one cannot be a Traditionalist and remain outside one or other of the Traditions.

The position of the Bloomsbury crowd, on the other hand, was to turn disillusionment into a sort of aesthetic experience. This position was nicely put by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*:

> So great can the burden of enjoying oneself become, so clearly can the emptiness and boredom of pleasure appear as a threat, that the aesthete sometimes has to resort to … elaborate devices. He may even become an addicted reader of Kierkegaard and make of that despair which Kierkegaard saw as the aesthete's fate a new form of self-indulgence. And if over-indulgence in despair seems to be injuring his capacities for enjoyment, he will take himself to the therapist, just as he would for over-indulgence in alcohol, and make of his therapy one more aesthetic experience.

And so it was that the Bloomsbury crowd, having embraced Eliot at the beginning, could hardly turn away from him later. As Russell Kirk has pointed out, if Bloomsbury had excluded any talented man of originality—and Eliot was both talented and original—Bloomsbury would have been false to its own convention of unconventionality.

The relationship of Eliot with the two most famous Modernist poets of his time—Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats (the latter arguably not a Modernist in style, but we will let that ride)—is more complicated. To Pound especially, Eliot owed a great debt. It was he who championed Eliot's early poems, including *Prufrock*, and he who "acted as midwife" to *The Wasteland*, drastically editing Eliot's original and much longer poem. There is no question that Pound was a great poet, but to call him a Traditionalist is, to my mind, a bridge too far. His dislike of modernity—especially of the acquisitive society—was too emotional and not really linked to a traditional understanding of 'the common good'. Also, he was

politically naïve and, by associating himself with the Fascists, betrayed all that people like Eliot believed in. He was openly and loudly anti-Semitic and, perhaps slightly or more than slightly deranged. Indeed, it was a plea of madness pressed on the authorities by his friends, which saved him from being gaoled for life or executed as a traitor. Pound, incidentally was an habitual seducer and, as well as having a child by his wife Dorothy, had another by Olga Rudge. Both children were essentially abandoned by their parents. Dorothy's son was given to her mother to raise, whilst Olga's daughter was given to a childless peasant's wife. Dorothy at least took the trouble to visit her daughter in London each summer and, while she was absent, Pound spent the time with Olga. He hardly knew his children in their early years. One is forcibly reminded of Bertie Russell, two of whose children were made wards of the State, and Russell almost certainly had an 'affair' with the young and emotionally troubled Vivienne Eliot, when she and her husband were staying with him.

There are aspects of Yeats, too, which incline me to believe that he was not a Traditionalist, despite his Neo Platonism, his interest in Irish mythology, and in Byzantine Christianity. Yeats was a sort of intellectual butterfly, flitting from tradition to tradition and partaking of the nectar but not of the pollen. As he grew older Yeats became more and more 'this worldly' whereas Eliot did the opposite. I do not wish to labour this point, but might point to a well-known Yeats poem "A Dialogue of the Soul and the Self". Such "Dialogues" are part of the Western literary tradition, dating back to the Socrates of the *Phaedo* and the charioteer and winged horses of the *Phaedrus*. In poetry, I can think of such "Dialogues" by Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan, and I am sure there are many more examples in the Western literary tradition. Their general theme was didactic—the soul teaching the body restraint. Yeats' "Dialogue", though, gradually deteriorates from a magnificent Platonic beginning to the usual excuse of any old slobbering debauchee in any age—"I am content to follow to its source/Every event in action or in thought;/Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!" This was precisely the attitude of Dante's Ulysses, and why Dante had him in Hell. Not surprisingly, when Yeats grew old and his sexual powers diminished, he had recourse to the Steinach operation—to revive his drooping spirit, we might say. One of his late poems, *The Wild Old Wicked Man*, ends with the following lines:

> But a coarse old man am I,
> I choose the second-best,
> I forget it all awhile
> Upon a woman's breast.

Like Pound, he seemed to associate poetic insight with sexual activity. Alas, as he descended into old age, after numerous affairs, he found that while the spirit was willing, the flesh was unco-operative, Steinach notwithstanding.

And so, it is my contention that while Eliot was certainly "Modernist" in poetic style, he was very much a Traditionalist not just in terms of the content and message of his poetry, but in the conduct of his own private life as well. Yeats and Pound were not.

What is Eliot's Idea of Tradition?

To the uninformed reader, it seems at first that the terms 'Modernist' and 'Traditionalist' stand in direct opposition to each other. But the Modernist poets were 'modern' in this sense only: they reacted against the idea that a traditionalist should merely follow the example of the immediate past generations in poetic style and content. They wanted to cast their minds back much further and incorporate the ideas and achievements of more ancient poets and writers. This is particularly evident in Pound, where, for instance, in *Canto* 1 he gives us an account of the *Nekyia* from Homer, using a rather free translation of Andreas Divas first published in Latin in 1538. He deliberately choses to use archaic English and the effect is marvellous.

What the Modernists were trying to do is perhaps best illustrated by a hypothetical example. Suppose that the 18th C poets that we so admire for their poetry decided to be strict traditionalists and continue in the mould of the 17th C metaphysical poets. The whole Romantic movement in poetry would simply not have come to pass.

But Eliot went much further than this. He explained his position in an essay entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (published in *The Sacred Wood*, 1920):

> Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within

> it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.

There is, contained in this account a notion of time which is front and centre in nearly all of Eliot's poetry. I have little doubt that his reflections on time owe a great deal to his reading of St Augustine, specifically Book XI of *The Confessions*. Time past, time present, time future—how are they related? This is a constant theme in Eliot, brought to its culmination in "the still point of the turning world" of the *Four Quartets*. There is also the undoubted influence of what we have come to know as "The Mystical Theology", whose line we can trace back to its source in the Vedas and Neo-Platonism. From this latter it was carried into the West by pseudo-Dionysius, then John Scotus Erigena, down through the ages to people like John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich. All of these were known to Eliot.

Time then becomes, in Plato's famous description, "a moving image of eternity". And though we are creatures of time trapped in its unfolding sequence of events—we are also creatures of eternity. We cannot escape time, but we can redeem it, as it were, thereby entering eternity. In that process of redemption, Eliot employs a notion not dissimilar to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the *Mystici Corporis Christi* —the Mystical Body of Christ. Here all souls, including those departed from this world, are united. The general idea is shared by those in the Anglo-Catholic tradition and, as C.S. Lewis points out, our immortality is directly related to our union with Christ — "The Mystical Body of Christ is a metaphor for the cosmic Christ, who pervades and penetrates the entire universe" (Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 1941). This is the theme taken up by Eliot, especially in his later writings and poetry. No doubt, he has in mind that famous biblical *"ego eimi"*— I AM. Here we have an expression of the Divine as the author and very heart of all being. Incidentally, such traditional notions of Being explain why Eliot was so angered by modern attempts to 'simplify' the Bible. The voice from the burning bush (*Exodus*) was traditionally rendered in capitals, I AM THAT I AM. In modern translations it is often rendered "I am who I am". There is a huge difference, especially to the ordinary reader, untutored in the labyrinthine ways of biblical exegesis.

Intimations Of Immortality in Prufrock and The Waste Land

It was the publication of *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in 1915 that first brought Eliot to the attention of a small but influential audience. At the surface level, it appears to be a poem about a very insecure and timid man unable to pluck up enough courage to mix and converse with the opposite sex. With Eliot,

of course, you know that things run much deeper. The quotation at the head of the poem is from Dante's *Inferno,* so we know that hell is involved. Beyond that, there is little that I want to say by way of explication.

Indeed there are as many variant explanations of this poem as there are readers of it. This is a deliberate ploy by Eliot, who would have each of us draw our own lessons from his poems. It will suffice merely to say that the poem is a prolonged meditation on the famous Socratic dictum "The unexamined life is not worth living". Not to ask the big questions and not to come some conviction in the soul is to be condemned to hell. We must redeem the time—our time.

One of the things worth noticing in this early poem of Eliot's is his frequent allusion to themes in the literary tradition. This, too, is a constant feature in nearly all of Eliot's poems. We have already mentioned Dante, but later in the poem, there is the repeated line "And indeed there will be time". This, of course, is lifted straight from *Ecclesiastes*. To give one more example—a little more obscure—we have, at the end of the poem, these lines on the mermaids:

> I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
> Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
> When the wind blows the water white and black.
> We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
> By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
> Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

This is a reference to Homer's *Iliad*, Book 18. Eliot's mermaids are the Nereids, living in their undersea cavern.

Eliot has a specific purpose in referencing the literary tradition in this way. It is not plagiarism, neither is it an attempt to let us know just how well read he is (some of the more ignorant Eliot commentators suggest he is merely showing off). Rather, he wants us to realize that, as he puts it, "the poet has to live not only in the present, but in the present moment of the past". And the great intellectual and spiritual achievents of the past are now in danger of being extirpated. He makes this explicit in *Four Quartets*:

> There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
> And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
> That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss
> For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

In 1922 *The Wasteland* was published, following a long gestation (it was probably started about 1915) and a birth where Pound acted as midwife (his own description). The poem was initially much longer and given a different title—*He Do The Police in Different Voices*. Pound took to it with a chainsaw, excising much material and suggesting a different title. Eliot immediately recognised that

Pound had improved the poem dramatically and acknowledged his input at the head of the poem—"*Il miglior fabbro*". This was drawn from Dante's *Inferno* and translates as "the better poet".

This new poem hit the literary scene like a bombshell and took all before it. It was completely novel in every way except, of course, for its underlying theme of spiritual and moral decay. As William Carlos Williams was to say, 'It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust". For the UK edition of the work, Eliot supplies a long series of Footnotes, these being in many ways even more enigmatic than the poem itself.

It is not my intent here to provide some sort of explication—like *Prufrock*, the poem elicits different responses from different people. We can say, however, that the poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue (actually several monologues) with separate 'characters' mounting the stage. There is no central narrative and the whole thing has more of the structure of a music hall evening (which species of entertainment Eliot enjoyed), or a talent quest. This is why many people, myself included, have found that the best way to come to the poem is via good sound recordings of readings by well-known actors and actresses. My own recommendations would be recordings by Alec Guinness, Edward Fox, and Eileen Atkins. Both Pound and Eliot recognised the importance of cadence—a rhythmic sequence or flow of sounds. Indeed that is one of the reasons that people with little or no great knowledge of literature are attracted to the poem, and find themselves committing little phrases or sections to memory.

Despite its enigmatic character, the poem has an underlying theme of decay and dissolution, and fragments of the literary tradition are brought in to highlight the depths to which we have descended. Indeed, there is a point in the poem where Eliot presents three such fragments (in Italian, English and French) then says "These fragments I have shored up against my ruins".

Much has been made of Eliot's Footnotes and, on the basis of their contents, many wild claims made concerning the poem. But we need to tread very carefully here because those that knew Eliot well suggest that the Footnotes were really just an afterthought (the publisher needed more content to fill otherwise blank pages), and that Eliot may have carefully laid what is known to an old biologist like myself as "the hare's scent". Traditionally hares were reputed to have the ability to lay a false scent, leading potential predators away from their young (they nest above ground). Eliot may have enjoyed the spectacle of learned critics and scholars of his time following various will-o-the-wisps.

Whilst Eliot suggests in the Footnotes that Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* (an account of the genesis of Arthurian legend), and Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* are important influences in the poem, there is, to me, relatively little direct evidence of this in the poem itself. The title, of course, does refer to Arthurian Legend where the Waste Land comes about when the king is 'wounded through the thighs'. The king's sterility is then transferred to his lands. The Fisher King has a couple of very brief appearances in the poem and there are a couple of moments in the poem when Frazer's "Corn King' might be discerned. To my mind, however, the figure of Tiresias is far more important in the poem. The blind Theban prophet ("I who have sat at Thebes below the wall/ And walked amongst the lowest of the dead") allows Eliot to travel backwards and forwards through time. Tiresias, by being hermaphroditic also allows Eliot to hint at a sort of degenerate sexuality he sees around him (most notably in the seduction scene of "The Fire Sermon' and the pub scene with Lil and Albert).

I agree entirely with Frank Kermode and Stephen Spender that the poem has a strong religious tone. Both point to frequent use of imagery from the Bible, especially the Old Testament—*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/Out of this stony rubbish*? Although both Buddhism and Hinduism are referenced in the poem, the biblical motifs of the desert and the wandering in the wilderness are strong. Indeed, in the last section of the poem, "What the Thunder Said", the contrast of the dry, sterile desert and the lifegiving properties of water is brought almost to a fever pitch. Here, in a sequence of 19 lines, the absence of water builds up to a crescendo. Water, of course, is a powerful symbol of the Spirit and we think immediately of the Judeo-Christian notion of Baptism—"Unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God (John 3. KJV). It is hard to ignore the connection, as much as the secular critic may wish to do so. Moreover, those 19 lines are immediately followed by what is almost certainly a reference to "the road to Emmaus" :

> Who is the third who walks always beside you?
> When I count, there are only you and I together
> But when I look ahead up the white road
> There is always another one walking beside you
> Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
> I do not know whether a man or a woman
> —But who is that on the other side of you?

The poem ends on a note almost of hope, perhaps prefiguring the journey of Eliot himself and his own escape from the dry stony desert, epitomised in *Four Quartets*. Fragments from the *Upanishads* are brought before us, and the God of

thunder—the I AM—calls for restraint, charity and compassion. The poem ends with 'Shantih, shantih, shantih' —'the peace that surpasses all understanding'.

Of course, there are any number of critics who labour mightily to deny that Eliot had any sort of religious or moral purpose in this poem. But it is difficult to carry off such an argument with any conviction. We know from his *Criterion* articles that Eliot did have strong convictions concerning the nexus between morality and religion. We know, too, that Dr Johnson was one of his favourite 18th C authors and that Johnson believed, passionately, that no author should write without a moral purpose. In his *Preface to Shakespeare*, Johnson found fault with Shakespeare because that latter "sacrifices virtue to convenience and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose ...".

I would now like to move to Eliot's *Four Quartets* and to the proposition that, in this great poem, Eliot eventually comes to some consideration of that "peace that surpasses all understanding" with which he closes *The Waste Land*. I do not suggest that the poem is some account of an epiphany or of some elevated vision on his part, but rather that he comes to a sober realisation of what is *required* for such an experience—a total submission of the intellect to some higher truth. It was something experienced by Pascal (whom Eliot admired) and he did, indeed, have his 'Night of Fire', but only after he had come to know the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob", and "Not of the philosophers and the wise". In Eliot's case, it led to his baptism in the Anglican Communion and his total acceptance of the Christian message in its traditional Anglo-Catholic setting. We might say of Eliot then, as of Pascal before him, that he was forced to his knees by the sheer weight of his intellect. There comes that point when the intellect, by its own activity, arrives at a position of pure humility before that which has been the object of its search.

Eliot once remarked that " If we learn to read poetry properly, the poet never persuades us to believe anything…What we learn from Dante, or the Bhagavad-Gita, or any other religious poetry is what it feels like to believe that religion". And this is what Eliot tries to convey in *Four Quartets*. It is the *experience* of belief that he wishes to convey. He is no proselytiser or soapbox doomsayer.

Like most of Eliot's poetry, *Four Quartets* is no easy read—you have to work at it and, especially, discern its music. It is in four parts or sections, 'Burnt Norton', 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages' and 'Little Gidding'. These are geographical locations, all but 'The Dry Salvages' being in England and having specific historical significance to Eliot. The last named (pronounced 'dry-salve-ages') refers to an offshore rocky reef near Massachusetts where the young Eliot used to

sail during his summer holidays. These four titles are supposed (by many learned scholars) to represent respectively air, earth, water and fire—the four classical elements. I cannot make the connection myself except perhaps for the association of Little Gidding with fire, but it is not physical fire, it is the "fire" of the Holy Spirit—Pentecostal fire. The fires of the London Blitz are transmogrified.

Whole books of exegesis have been written about *Four Quartets* and it is not my aim here to attempt such a task. Perhaps all I can do is set out what I believe to be the endpoint of the whole work and, indeed, the endpoint of Eliot's own personal journey through life. Earlier in this essay I remarked on Eliot's constant theme of the riddle of time-the fact that we are creatures of time, yet somehow or other have intimations of immortality and can entertain the concept of eternity. Prufrock's big problem, of course, is that he refuses to meet the issue head on and make some decision. In *The Waste Land*, too, the consequences of abandoning the task are put before us in dramatic fashion—we become that crowd of zombies shuffling over London Bridge, or the typist and her 'lover', reducing love to a sort of routine animality, and thereby "finding the stairs unlit". And now, finally, in *Four Quartets*, we have the process of meeting 'the overwhelming question" head-on in a spirit of total humility. As Eliot (and Heraclitus before him) tells us, "the way up is the way down".

The endpoint for Eliot is what he calls "the still point of the turning world". This is no poetic fancy, no abstruse metaphysical concept. It is a both a mystery and a reality, best exemplified in the actual physical operation of a wheel (it is no co-incidence that the wheel or turning circle should be such a potent symbol in so many traditional cultures—we need merely think of the symbolism associated with the revolution of the heavens). If you consider a wheel turning on an axle, the outer rim of the wheel will be moving at a certain speed. As you move inwards along any radius, the speed decreases until you reach a point at the very centre of the wheel where nothing moves at all. This is both a mathematical reality and a mystery. In the spiritual journey of the soul, the still point is the final destination, the Beatific Vision, the vision of the Good. And there, as Julian of Norwich tells us,

All things shall be well
And all manner of things shall be well.

This is the truth that Eliot came to. Whether or not he finally reached that destination "Where the fire and the rose are one", is not for us to know in this life. We, like him, must pick our way through the stony desert of the Waste Land. But at least, we may consult him as a guide.

MACINTYRE AND THE MORAL ORDER

Every action is the bearer and expression of more or less theory-laden beliefs and concepts; every piece of theorizing and every expression of belief is a political and moral action.
Alasdair. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*

PROLOGUE

It would be difficult to over-emphasise the importance of the above quote from Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. It contains, in one succinct sentence, a much-needed reminder that most things that we now take to be 'normal' or 'everyday' were not so at some time in the past. With the exception of the autonomous nervous system and our basic physiological requirements, every action we perform, every choice we make can be traced back to some alpha point where an initial decision was made by us or our ancestors, remote and not so remote. And such initial decisions are not made *in vacuo*, so to speak. They are made on the basis of theories and beliefs which, themselves, constitute political or moral actions and which all have a history of their own. And yet we act, for the most part, as if the past were merely a prelude to the present.

Perhaps the chief reason for what I might call the assumed 'givenness' of our present condition is our general acceptance of the notion of progress—an idea generally unknown before the 17th C. Whilst the idea of material progress has abated somewhat since the coming of the atomic age and the age of ecology, it still looms large in the area of political and moral life. A great many of us still believe, along with Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, that the modern liberal democratic state, for all if its failings, represents our *only* real alternative, all other forms of human social and economic behaviour leading inexorably to various forms of totalitarianism or other regressive polities destructive of human freedom. A similarly large number of us believe too, that our modern notion of secular morality, freed from the alleged superstitions and prejudices of earlier religious dogmatisms, delivers a fairer and more just society where the 'rights' of the individual are paramount and trump all other considerations within the general provisos given to us by J.S. Mill: "The sole end for which mankind are (sic) warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection".

And yet it is now apparent that the liberal democratic state and its attendant secular moral order, born only a few centuries ago, is a sickly child indeed. As I write these words, Americans are still reeling from the shock of recent events,

where an armed mob stormed the Capitol building—a central symbol of American democracy.

Meanwhile, those citizens who hold to beliefs consistent with their religious traditions find that the so-called 'tolerance' and 'pluralism' of the modern liberal state is an illusion. It is traditionally-minded Christians, especially, who have suffered under this 'soft totalitarianism' of the modern liberal state. I use the term 'traditionally-minded' for good reason. There are, of course, many Christians (or at least many who identify as Christians) who are quite at home in the modern liberal order, for they have been prepared to jettison many of those fundamental values once central to the Christian tradition. They are, as it were, "low carb" Christians, for whom any whiff of dogma is the spiritual equivalent of sugary drinks and fatty foods.

How did we get to this impasse and what can we do about it? In the first place, it is now quite evident that recourse to rational argument is useless. It is useless because in the reigning atmosphere of moral relativism, one argument is as good as another. What matters, at the end of the day is power. If my views command a bigger presence on Facebook and Twitter than yours, then it is my views that will generally prevail.

It is, of course, hardly a new story. When Thucydides gave us his account of wars between the Greek city-states (*History of the Peloponnesian Wars)* he included a famous episode where the conquered Melians begged for mercy from the victorious Athenians. Here, in part, is the Athenian response:

> Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made; we found it existing before us, and will leave it to exist forever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else having the same power as we have would do the same as we do.

Here is a justification of raw power and the same justification is implied today whenever the so-called 'majority view' prevails. For it turns out that the 'majority' are those with the loudest voices and the best social networks on Facebook and Twitter. It is not Truth that matters, but effectiveness. In any case, Truth has been banished. In the face of such resources then, what hope do we have?

In the following account,, I would like to consider some themes in MacIntyre's most famous book, *After Virtue*. My version, of course, will be a much condensed and no doubt inadequate account of just how it is that we reached this impasse where it seems that reasoned argument and what we once

called "common sense" is now impotent in the face of a sort of collective Nietzschean Will, deeply embedded in the heart of modern liberalism.

At the outset I must remind the reader that I have little professional background in philosophy and, like many others who have attempted to read MacIntyre, have found it a difficult task. It has taken me at least three full readings of MacIntyre's main work, *After Virtue*, to glean what I take to be his main messages. It is not that he uses highly technical language, although this does occur from time to time. Rather, his writing style is not conducive to easy understanding. He often uses very long sentences and one loses track of subject and predicate, etc. such that it is often necessary to re-read the sentence several times. I had thought that this was just my own deficiency as a reader but, having now listened to an audiobook of *After Virtue* employing a skilled reader, I note that he has the same problem and, every now and then, must repeat a sentence to get the message right.

It will be clear to the reader that I present my analysis from the point of view of a religious believer, but such belief is not a necessary prerequisite either to understand MacIntyre's arguments or to assent to them. MacIntyre almost certainly wrote the bulk of *After Virtue* before he became a Catholic. Nonetheless, it is clear that, in the long history of virtue ethics, some form of religious belief always accompanied it—from Homer to the 17th C.

Some background on Alasdair MacIntyre and his work.

Throughout all of his writings on moral philosophy, one of the things that MacIntyre stresses is the need to see the development of all new ideas in the context of their historical settings. It is impossible, in other words, to write a history of philosophy which is entirely divorced from the more general history of the societies and eras within which such ideas developed. Now, precisely the same can be said of MacIntyre's own philosophical writings. It is important then that I give a brief sketch of MacIntyre's background and intellectual journey.

MacIntyre was born in Glasgow in 1929 but most of his education was in London (Queen Mary College and later, Oxford, where he took a MA. Degree). He began teaching at Manchester University in 1951 but later taught at Leeds, Essex, and Oxford Universities. In 1969 he shifted to America and there taught at several universities including Brandeis, Vanderbilt, Notre Dame and Yale. To me, at any rate, this sort of intellectual nomadism bespeaks a certain restlessness of spirit.

In his early years MacIntyre, like so many western intellectuals in the immediate post-war years, became interested in Marxism. Indeed, it is fair to say

that MacIntyre has never completely repudiated *all* of Marx's critiques of capitalism. Of course, he quickly renounced such Marxist fantasies as 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' and of 'the withering away of the state'. But it has been a consistent feature of MacIntyre's work that he will draw upon ideas irrespective of their parentage. What matters is their explanatory power and their relevance to his general thesis. Thus readers will find that he has a high regard for some of Nietzsche's ideas whilst dismissing his mad ravings concerning the *Übermensch* and the supposed 'slave morality' of Christianity. The importance of Nietzsche will become clearer as we delve into MacIntyre's main thesis concerning the present state of moral discourse in the West.

To my mind, at any rate, MacIntyre's early interest in Marxism was crucial in the development of his later thought. It gave him a perspective which was outside the dominant liberal/democratic/capitalist worldview, and this allowed him to question the validity of all of those Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies which formed the basis of such a worldview.

To some of my readers at least, such questioning may seem to be bordering on heretical. But it is easy to forget that the system of political and social order which we employ is very largely judged on the basis of the outcome of its hideous totalitarian alternatives. Seldom do we appraise it from the standpoint of those traditional Christian perspectives which are central to the Gospel message. Perhaps there is a "third way" between liberal capitalism and its ugly totalitarian alternatives. And so, maybe that famous line from Kenneth Minogue—"Capitalism is what people do if you leave them alone"—is in need of emendation.

The other features of MacIntyre's intellectual journey have been his intellectual honesty and his deep commitment to follow the dictates of human reasoning, wherever they might take him. Many professional philosophers of our time seem to regard their profession as an opportunity to advance their skills and defend novel ideas without any necessary personal commitment to such ideas. The whole business seems to be little more than a game of wits and an opportunity to show off. A comparison with the Sophists of Plato's day would not be out of order. Moreover such philosophizing seems to take place in a sort of moral vacuum. Although "Possible Worlds" philosophy might have its uses in modal logic, etc, it is very far removed, indeed, from our everyday life and the range of moral choices we need to make in that life. "When speculation has done its worst", said Dr Johnson, "two and two still make four".

MacIntyre, on the other hand, is much like the Socrates of old, whose life of philosophizing was to answer the question "How should I live?" It is clear from

his writings that he takes moral enquiry very seriously at a personal level. This commitment, along with his personal honesty, has seen him modify or abandon many of his early ideas in the face of new-found evidence or in those comments of his critics which he believes are valid critiques of one or more of his ideas.

An example of this intellectual honesty would not go astray here. At some stage in his teaching career, MacIntyre decided he would expose his students to the writings of St Thomas Aquinas. His purpose in doing so was to point out to them just where Aquinas had gone wrong. However, in the course of his reading of the *Summa*, quite the opposite result ensued. It was Aquinas who 'showed up' MacIntyre and not the other way round. MacIntyre now considers himself to be an "Augustinian Thomist". He converted to Catholicism in 1981, the same year that *After Virtue* was first published.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that, for MacIntyre, philosophical ideas cannot be divorced from their historical settings. If you go to the Internet and search for "History of Philosophy" you will typically be given a sort of sequence starting, perhaps, with the Pre-Socratics, then moving to Plato, Aristotle, Medieval philosophy, early modern philosophy, 'Enlightenment' philosophy, and finishing with philosophers of our own era. The inference is a sort of development and enlargement of philosophical thought such that, say, the work of Hume or Kant or WVO Quine 'corrects' some of the 'errors' made by Plato or Aristotle. But this, as MacIntyre points out, is a nonsense. Every philosopher is a child of his or her own era with all the background baggage which that entails. But just because Plato lived some two and a half thousand years ago does not mean that his ideas are out of date. Indeed, I suspect that, for MacIntyre, the very phrase "out of date" is a loaded one, carrying its own baggage of doubtful suppositions and unquestioned assumptions.

Another general feature of MacIntyre's work is the sheer range of published material he quotes in developing his arguments. Of course, we would expect that MacIntyre would quote from the works of the major western philosophers over the last two and a half millennia, but we find that he also quotes extensively from great works of fiction, from history books, from sociologists, economists, political theorists, games theory proponents, and so on.

Of course, like all of us, MacIntyre has his personal likes and dislikes. He likes Jane Austen and detests the Bloomsbury crowd. He particularly dislikes the modern bureaucratic manager and, in *After Virtue*, devotes a good deal of space to dismantling his or her pretensions to some special sort of knowledge. Likewise, he is rather scathing in his treatment of the social sciences in general, and their pretensions to be 'scientific'. Whether these personal likes and dislikes have overly

influenced his arguments is matter for each reader to judge for himself or herself. For my own part, I find his dislike of bureaucracies entirely reasonable. There again, I spent a good man years as a public servant and endured a great many reorganisations and courses in human resource management!

Lastly, I do not want to suggest that the general ideas put forward by MacIntyre are always peculiarly his own. In particular he owes a debt of gratitude to those advocates of 'virtue ethics' who came before him, most notably Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geech. Another writer who has clearly influenced MacIntyre is Phillip Rieff and, in parts of *After Virtue*, there are clear echoes of themes developed by Rieff in his The *Triumph of the Therapeutic*. For all that though, MacIntyre's contribution to the debates in modern moral philosophy would be difficult to over-estimate. *After Virtue* is now in its third edition, with numerous imprints for each one. It has been translated into nearly every major language on the globe. Today, some 40 years after its first appearance it is still widely quoted and widely debated. Moreover, an increasing number of mainly younger Christian scholars, influenced in no small way by MacIntyre's writings, have taken up many of his ideas to promote various avenues of what they term 'postliberal thought'.

MacIntyre is now in his nineties but, as of a year or two ago, was still giving lectures and developing his ideas. For him, as for Aquinas, all conclusions in philosophy are tentative and amenable to improvement and emendation. We are after all, fallen creatures with imperfect knowledge. Looking back over those ninety plus years, MacIntyre might reflect along with us that God works in mysterious ways indeed!

What is virtue ethics?

In my attempted exposition of Alasdair MacIntyre's most famous work, *After Virtue*, I propose to take a slightly different course than that taken by the author. I do this because, in my own case, I have found it easier to follow his general argument by first understanding precisely what he wishes to defend and to recommend in the book. What he wishes to defend, in fact, is something called virtue ethics and it would be helpful to understand that term before we delve more deeply into the book. In what follows, I am going to assume that my readers have no significant background in in the field of moral philosophy—very much my own situation when I first began to read *After Virtue* many years ago.

At the outset, it needs to be stressed that what may first seem to be a rather tedious and obscure set of explanations and definitions turn out to be of critical importance for our understanding of the whole problem associated with those

modern moral philosophies which purport to offer 'reasoned' and 'inclusive' alternatives to an historical system of moral reasoning which dates back to the very birth of the West and which sustained Christendom for the greater part of its history—certainly until the 17th Century. That historic system is called virtue ethics.

Very often, you will hear someone say something like the following: "He was saved from serious injury by virtue of wearing a safety helmet". Or, perhaps, "He was given a promotion by virtue of his long and dutiful service to the Company". In these, or similar sentences, the word virtue is being used in a much older context than we might suppose. For here it might be substituted for something like "by means of", whereas in more modern usage a virtue is more commonly used to denote something like an admirable quality in some person. Indeed, even the latter usage is going out of date rapidly for, today, to be 'virtuous' almost means that you are missing out on something—that you are not enjoying life to the full. So, for instance, there is a film called "The Forty-year old Virgin", in which the once praised virtue of chastity is ridiculed.

And so, in its older usage—a usage which, as I have said above, dates back to the birth of Western Civilisation—a virtue is a means to some end. But what end? The short answer is human happiness or human flourishing. But why happiness? Why not 'peace' or 'prosperity' or any other desirable human state? The answer, I suggest, is that all other end states are more correctly to be classed as means, not ends. All other desired human states are desired, in the final analysis, because they promote or enable happiness.

It was Aristotle who first codified the virtues that he supposed were necessary to achieve the end state of happiness. Of course, the general concept of a virtue long predates Aristotle. As MacIntyre points out, certain virtues are implicit in Homeric Greek society—courage being the pre-eminent example. But irrespective of whether the virtues are those of Homeric Greece, the Greece of Plato and Aristotle, or, indeed, the virtues of the later Christian era, they all share one thing in common: the practice of the virtues is only possible within a system of co-operative human activity—a system of shared beliefs and customs, of defined roles (soldier, craftsman, housewife, etc), and of recognised social obligations. Note immediately how this differs from our own situation where "the rights of the individual" trump all other rights and obligations.

This brings us to another notion employed by MacIntyre, that of a *practice*. Now, it is typical of MacIntyre that his careful definitions of things like 'virtue" and 'practice' are themselves reliant on antecedent definitions of other things. We cannot fully define what a virtue is until we have defined what a practice is and

vice versa. But to define a practice requires us to back-track even further and define something which MacIntyre calls 'internal goods'.

Perhaps the best way to explain the term 'internal goods' is via example. MacIntyre uses the game of chess as his example. Suppose you wish to introduce your young child to the game of chess. You wish to do so because you know the game is challenging and rewarding. You also know that it is a good vehicle for social interaction with others. At the beginning, the child may not show much interest in the game, so you decide to offer him or her a reward for playing. Note that this reward has nothing to do with the game itself. It is an *external* reward. Now, of course, initially there is nothing to prevent the child from cheating in order to receive the reward.

If the child persists with the game, however, eventually he or she will come to appreciate the game for the challenges it presents and cheating would clearly negate any such challenges. The child will come to see that the rules of the game are absolutely necessary if one is to really enjoy the challenges it presents. And this latter reward—the challenge and the ensuing satisfaction is an internal reward. It can only be obtained within the rules and methods of the game. The child will now play for love of the game itself and external rewards will not be necessary. Moreover, one can discern a definite end or goal—that of achieving excellence in the skill of outmanoeuvring an opponent.

MacIntyre would call the game of chess a *practice*. It is a practice because the 'goods' it offers are *internal* (they come from the game itself) and the game has its own standards of excellence towards which the player can aspire. And it will be obvious too, that the game of chess requires certain virtues, the most obvious being that of honesty.

Note that the standards required for the game of chess are not the same as those for some other form of activity—sheep farming or building fine furniture. Note too, that not all human activity is a *practice* in the MacIntyrean sense. 'Skipping' stones across a lake is not a practice because there are no defined rules or standards required and there is no sort of co-operative human activity involved.

So now, hopefully, we are in a position to understand MacIntyre's own formal definitions of *practice* and *virtue*:

> By a '**practice**' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to

> achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.
>
> A **virtue** is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.

Note that MacIntyre uses words like 'acquired', 'possession' and 'exercise' to emphasis the fact that a virtue is not just some spur-of -the-moment impulse to do something good. It is, rather, a habit of mind, developed and maintained over time. Such habits of mind enable us to achieve the excellence (or happiness) we seek. They are, in fact, settled character traits—entrenched dispositions which enable us to become good human beings—not just good in reference to our own disposition, but good also in the sense that that they promote the human community (the family, the village, etc). And these character traits are acquired by a process of training —they are not just happened upon.

It is also important to understand that in what MacIntyre calls practices, the goods to be obtained and the standards required to do so are above any subjective individual judgement (i.e. they are objective and not subjective). Contrast this with today's emphasis on the individual where subjective standards are held to be good things—"doing your own thing".

In dealing with this whole area of virtue ethics there is another important concept to be considered. This, Aristotle called *phronesis* and we translate as 'practical wisdom'. Practical wisdom is the exercise of reason (good judgement) in the practice of the virtues. It is knowing the best way to act in a given circumstance—not just the best way for us, but for our families and our communities as well. Here again, a certain training in the art of good discernment is required. Wisdom comes with experience.

Translated into the traditional Christian moral order, the virtues enable us to practice the message of the Gospel in this life and to achieve our ultimate aim of the beatific vision. Importantly, though MacIntyre does not stress the *religious* side of virtue ethics in *After Virtue* because he wishes to engage with other post-Christian moral schemas on their own ground. His arguments do not require religious belief as a pre-requisite.

Now, the reader might be tempted to say; "well, all this is pretty self-evident, so what's the point"? Well, as we shall see later on, this traditional schema of the moral order was overturned some three centuries ago due to the confluence of many things—the aftermath of the Reformation, the rise of the scientific worldview and the increasing secularisation of western society. The critical question then arises: have we managed to provide some workable alternative

system of moral philosophy to supplant what was destroyed? MacIntyre argues that we have not. Indeed, he goes further. He suggests that what we have today are mere unconnected fragments of this older schema which masquerade as a coherent moral enterprise.

One final reflection on the virtues before we move on to consider MacIntyre's reasons for his claim. Let us suppose that the traditional system of moral philosophy is, indeed, the only one which can adequately (but by no means perfectly) provide what humans most desire—happiness or a sense of wellbeing. In that case, we would expect that those substitute philosophies cannot deliver on what they claim. And so, the end result would be a great deal of *unhappiness* in the modern West. Now, I invite readers to visit the *Beyond Blue* website at (https://www.beyondblue.org.au/). There you will find some staggering figures on the scale of depression and suicide in Australia. Much the same situation is occurring in the USA and I recently reviewed a book entitled *Deaths of Despair*. Indeed, in the USA life expectancy has fallen for the past three years in a row. The increases in such deaths are not just from straight suicide, but from alcohol and drug overdose as well. In other words, when true happiness cannot be gained, the attempt to achieve chemical happiness is bound to fail.

Of course, the modern-day secular humanist will here protest that I have no way on knowing the figures for depression and suicide in former ages. Indeed, even if I did have such figures, the old, weather-beaten excuse would immediately be proffered: "But the people back then were too scared to take their own life because of the fear of eternal damnation"! This completely evades the issue. The whole point of abandoning the old schema was, so we are told, to deliver people from the fear and ignorance of an earlier age—to relieve them of their superstitious religious beliefs or irrational fears and 'enlighten' them. In this task, it has manifestly failed. We are now faced with little short of an epidemic of depression, suicide and drug and alcohol abuse. We ought to examine why this is so. Here, Macintyre can help us.

Having now given his brief and no doubt inadequate account of virtue ethics we will, now need to consider the genesis of the modern day alternatives, their inadequacies, and their consequences.

The demise of the old moral order and "The Enlightenment Project".

Let us first go back a step and reconsider one of the concepts at the core of virtue ethics. What the ancient Greeks called a *telos*, we normally translate as an 'end' or final destination. It is also translated as 'final cause' and thus, Aristotle's definition often reads: "that for the sake of which a thing is done". It was one of

the four causes which explained why things are as they are—formal cause, material cause, efficient cause, and final cause.

Now, clearly, there is no point in practicing the virtues if one has no clear purpose in mind—some sort of 'end game'. For Aristotle it was happiness or 'wellbeing'. We are unsure as to whether Aristotle projected his 'happiness' beyond this life as he is equivocal on this point (Plato, on the other hand, is not). Nonetheless, when the medieval scholastics incorporated Aristotelianism into Christian philosophy (mainly through St Thomas Aquinas), the final end of a human life was not just earthly happiness but the beatific vision of the next life. Practicing the virtues would assist us in this task not, of course, without the help of God's grace.

Consider now the fate of such a notion as 'final cause' after the Reformation. Martin Luther asserted that we can only attain salvation by faith alone (*Sola fide*). Such was the wretchedness of Fallen Man that, to suppose he could do anything to improve himself in God's eyes was out of the question. He was utterly dependent on the mercy and grace of God. Men and women could not, by the practice of the virtues, help themselves to achieve their final end. Of course, this did not mean that humans should cease to be virtuous. Rather, they would be virtuous purely as a sort of unearned side-effect of following the Gospel message. Final causes would be otiose.

Remember, too that the Reformers disliked the late medieval scholastics because of what they saw as their rarefied arguments and point scoring which seemed to have little to do with the practice of the Christian faith. They spent too much time arguing as to whether "a Million of Angels may not fit upon a Needle's point". Moreover, the Reformers charged them with having introduced paganism (Plato and Aristotle) into Christianity, thus sullying the purity and simplicity of the Gospel message.

If we now move forward a little to the 17th C, we have famous figures like Descartes and Lord Bacon completely dismissing the notion of final causes. These two figures were enormously influential. Indeed, we generally date the birth of modern philosophy from the publication of Descartes works and Francis Bacon is often called "the father of modern science". It is beyond my remit here to explain their reasons. Sufficient to say that, in both cases, they felt it was an impediment to true scientific discovery.

Further attacks on virtue ethics came in the 18th C. One of the key ideas in virtue ethics is what is sometimes termed a 'functional concept'. So, for instance, the word 'clock' is such a functional concept. When we think of a clock, we immediately associate it with the purpose of keeping time and not for "throwing

at the cat", for instance (one of Macintyre's rare lighter moments in *After Virtue*). So it is with a huge range of words. In virtue ethics, the words 'man' and 'woman' are such functional concepts because the very words imply some end or purpose. We could not adequately replace such words with, say, 'higher vertebrate animal'. Being a man or a woman immediately implies certain functions, values, and ends. But this view was challenged head on by the philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) in a famous argument often called 'Hume's guillotine'.

In brief, what Hume claimed is that we cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. That is, from a factual statement or a series of factual statements we cannot derive *values*. To put it another way, if a reasoner only has access to non-moral and non-evaluative factual premises, the reasoner cannot logically infer the truth of moral statements. When we use the word 'man' or 'woman', nothing 'extra' can be implied. It is a bare factual statement and gives us no information on purposes or functions. This and related arguments in Enlightenment philosophy have had an enormous influence, despite the fact that Hume's reasoning here is very dodgy and hardly ever applies in real life. When we are given the factual statement "this is a wristwatch", we immediately (and quite naturally) know what it *ought* to do. It ought to keep good time and not be used to throw at the cat.

It is worth noting here that, if you deny that the term 'man' or 'woman' implies some specific set of functions, then you are more or less in the Nietzschean universe where you are completely free to determine your own destiny—what you are and what you do (MacIntyre has a chapter in *After Virtue* entitled "Nietzsche or Aristotle"—these are, finally, the only two options we have). And so, too , does the abandonment of a set of specific functions for humans led to that familiar modern catchcry "do your own thing". Other consequences spring to mind. One is supposed 'gender fluidity' and the assumed right to choose whether to be a man, woman or... whatever. In the universe of virtue ethics, such arbitrary choices cannot be employed without imperilling the whole system. Functional concepts are a given.

The mention of 'right to choose' brings us to another rather surprising outcome of the loss of the concepts of final cause/function in modern moral discourse. It has to do with the distinctly modern notion of 'Rights'. During the course of his exposition, MacIntyre makes what first seems to be a shocking claim—that the so-called 'Charter of Human Rights, and other related 'Rights' are moral fictions! "But surely", we say, "that cannot be the case. What about the 'Right to Life'"? Now, of course, MacIntyre, as a Catholic and a Thomist, surely believes that it a grave crime to kill an unborn infant. What he objects to

is the modern use of the word 'right' without any stated context. By virtue of what, exactly, do we have 'rights?, he would ask. We must understand that MacIntyre is quite specific about the type of rights which he believes to be moral fictions:

By 'rights' I do not mean those rights conferred by positive law or custom on specified classes of person; I mean those rights which are alleged to belong to human beings as such and which are cited as a reason for holding that people ought not to be interfered with in their pursuit of life, liberty and happiness.

And so, in order for humans to have 'rights', we need to ascribe to such humans some universal function/end such that the perceived violation of some 'right' prevents the human agent from achieving or attempting to achieve his or her proper function/end. What is that function? It is, of course, the traditional concept of the purpose of a human life, as I have discussed above. With some acerbity, MacIntyre points out that: "In the United Nations declaration on human rights of 1949 what has since become the normal UN practice of not giving good reasons for any assertions whatsoever is followed with great rigor".

Of course, some modern moral philosophers assert that we have basic 'intuitions' concerning human rights. But what, exactly is an intuition—what gives it sufficient moral force to demand our assent? As MacIntyre says: "one of the things that we ought to have learned from the history of moral philosophy is that the introduction of the word 'intuition' by a moral philosopher is always a signal that something has gone badly wrong with an argument."

But now, let us return briefly to Hume. One of the obvious corollaries of Hume's argument 'no ought from as is' concerns his attitude to moral philosophy. Quite obviously (to Hume), we cannot derive moral propositions simply by applying human reason to a series of facts. So where do we get them from? Hume thinks that they are part of what he calls our 'moral sentiments'. It is the 'feelings' and 'passions' which move us to moral action. But, as MacIntyre points out, the great advocate of human reason here betrays himself, for in his description of 'the passions' he rules out the passions of 'enthusiasts' (the Levellers and Catholics of an ascetic bent to name but two), thereby showed the prejudice of his age. And anyway, why should we trust our feelings and passions? What gives them sufficient force for global assent?

As has often been said by wise men and women, ideas have consequences. One of the consequences of Hume's advocacy for the passions was the decision by Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher (1724-1804) to examine the whole notion (Hume, he said, "awoke him from his slumbers"). And so it was that Kant erected his moral philosophy (countering Hume) specifically on the basis of a

higher human reason. He proposed that our moral order is imprinted—part of the architecture of the mind, as it were—and that it manifests itself as a duty—an imperative or a reason beyond question. It is an irreducible part of our makeup.

Here then, are two new and quite different secular approaches to moral philosophy, both designed to fill the void left by the destruction of the traditional notion of virtue ethics. But there were other candidate philosophies too. One of the most important was that of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). He is the 'father' of what we call utilitarianism. In determining our moral stance, he maintained, we must consider 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. What is 'the good' for Bentham? It is simply the maximising of pleasure and the minimising of pain. Bentham seems to equate pleasure with happiness and quite obviously seems to regard it as almost a physical sensation.

The problem is, of course, that not all pleasures are equal. Bentham's successor, J.S. Mill tried to address this problem but, so MacIntyre would argue, was completely unsuccessful. Even so, utilitarianism remains as a strong current in modern moral philosophy, one well known and current advocate being the Australian philosopher, Peter Singer.

Here then, in the briefest of outlines I have tried to sketch three different approaches designed to replace the traditional concept of the virtues. There are, of course, other approaches, but most of them are variants of those I have already identified. Can they all be right? Not only would MacIntyre answer in the negative, but he would also further claim that their adherents, though they might claim to base their arguments on careful reasoning, are actually engaged in what MacIntyre calls emotivism. This is a master stroke by MacIntyre because he turns a common argument, put forward by many secular-minded philosophers of our era, directly on its head.

Back some decades ago when I first started reading elementary philosophy texts, something called 'Logical Positivism' was all the go. It was made popular by AJ. Ayer (the Legs Diamond of philosophy) in a book titled *Language, Truth and Logic*. Ayer (who especially disliked religious belief) supposed that when someone says "This is good", they are saying no more than "Hurrah for this". In other words, they are simply expressing an emotion (hence emotivism). MacIntyre now turns the concept straight back upon the various modern contenders in the area of moral philosophy. Lacking any real basis for some universal assent based on reason, the various contenders, (Kantians, utilitarians, etc) invariably end up with nothing more than emotive arguments. Each side simply speaks past the other since their arguments are totally incommensurable.

The failure of modern moral philosophies.

We generally assume, when we talk to our friends and neighbours, read the newspapers, watch the news on television or listen to radio talkback shows, that most people share the same general ideas concerning what is good and what is evil.. However, it is the detailed process of applying such general beliefs to our everyday life that such apparent agreement tends to unravel .Murder, for instance, is almost universally recognised as an evil thing. But what about euthanasia and abortion? In these and similar scenarios, the near-universal assent suddenly dissolves into interminable argument. Why?

MacIntyre argues that the reason we fall into such interminable arguments is because each camp in the debate argues from different premises—neo-Kantians against utilitarians against Rights theorists etc. And there can be no resolution in these debates because, ultimately, there is no shared ground of reasoned argument on which to resolve differences. This suggests, in turn, that in each of the arguments, there is some element of subjectivity, perhaps quite unrecognised.

It is at this point that MacIntyre introduces Nietzsche to bolster his argument "What!", you exclaim with horror, "that mad dog!" Now it is true that Nietzsche did end up in an asylum and that his crazed utterances about the *Übermensch* and the 'slave morality' of Christianity are beneath contempt. But Nietzsche's dismissal of the whole Enlightenment moral project in *The Gay Science* is a brilliant piece of writing—incisive, witty, and utterly devastating. MacIntyre does not quote Nietzsche directly, but I would like to do so here by reproducing just that part of his critique aimed at Kant's moral philosophy. Recall that Kant tells us that our moral order comes to us in the form of an unconditional duty, something he calls 'the categorical imperative'. Here is part of Nietzsche's response:

> What? You admire the categorical imperative within' you? This' "firmness" of your so-called moral judgment? This "unconditional" feeling that "here everyone must judge as I do"? Rather admire your *selfishness* at this point. And the blindness, pettiness, and frugality of your selfishness. For it is selfish to experience one's own judgment as a universal law; and this selfishness is blind, petty, and frugal because it betrays that you have, not yet discovered yourself, nor created for yourself an ideal of your own, your very own-for that could never be somebody else's and much less that of all. (Section 335).

Nietzsche simply thumbs his nose at Kant, saying "why should I follow your advice?" And, of course, to all of the other contenders in the field, he would do likewise. To the utilitarians he would say: "you want me to act so as to produce

the greatest happiness for the greatest number? Whose conception of happiness—yours or mine?" And so on.

And it is worth elaborating a little on the utilitarian schema. Earlier on, I hinted that there were problems with Bentham's conception of "good" and that equating it with pleasure (as the opposite of pain) seems to demote it almost to some sort of physiological sensation. J.S. Mill, as Bentham's successor could see this problem and tried to get around it by proposing 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures. But irrespective of their quality and whether pleasure and happiness are the same thing (to me, very doubtful), massive problems are still involved. Confronted with Mill's utilitarian formula, you or I (or Nietzsche) might reasonably ask; 'but how do you arrive at the greatest pleasure for the greatest number?" Pleasures are of many sorts and the various sorts are non-additive. Without stooping to unnecessary crudity it is fair to say that there is a sort of base pleasure in evacuating one's bowels. Is this to be equated with listening to the Bach *C minor Passacaglia and Fugue*? Pleasures, in short, cannot be aggregated as Mill or Bentham suppose. There is no way of providing a calculus of pleasure such that we can deliver the greatest happiness to the greatest number.

Another writer that MacIntyre draws upon at some length is Kierkegaard. In his famous work *Either Or*, Kierkegaard introduces us to three 'characters', 'A' (a rich aesthete), 'B' (who commends an ethical way of life) and 'Victor Eremita' who simply edits and annotates the literary output of A and B. In commending the aesthetic way, A maintains the primacy of immediate experience—the total immersion of the self in one's own immediate pleasures, whilst B maintains that primacy must be given to one's obligations to others, to futurity, etc.

Suppose someone comes along wo has not yet chosen which path to follow—the aesthetic or the moral. Suppose, though, that he or she is slightly inclined to choose the moral But to be so inclined is to have already decided that the moral argument has some force which the other lacks. And this, in turn, shows that the enquirer was not really *a tabula rasa*, so to speak. He or she, in fact, had already made a choice. In short, what Kierkegaard puts before us is not the choice to decide between the aesthetic and the moral, but to accept whether or not to make *any* judgements using those terms. He implies a sort of meta-judgement—a judgment whether to judge on those terms!

This again highlights a sort of deep incoherence in all of those secular moral schemes associated with Enlightenment philosophy. Our much-vaunted reliance on human reason to provide an adequate moral base seems to have led us to an impasse.

This brings us to the question as to whether Nietzsche's dismissal of Enlightenment moral philosophy is also effective against the older traditional schema involving virtue ethics. Nietzsche, of course, believes he can so dismiss it as being part of the 'slave morality' of Christianity. So, in bringing Nietzsche to his aid is MacIntyre thereby hoist on his own petard? MacIntyre would claim otherwise. In a later book, *Dependent Rational Animals*, he defends virtue ethics from a very different angle—one that would counter Nietzsche's claim. I have only briefly glossed through *Dependent Rational Animals* and what I have to say here may well misrepresent MacIntyre on many points. However, let me proceed with what I imagine MacIntyre's response to Nietzsche would be.

At the time of publication of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche was living off a pension from his former employer, the University of Basel. He travelled widely throughout Europe in those years, meeting a great many intellectuals. He had, at this time a private secretary, Peter Gast. Responding once to Nietzsche's claim that the *Übermensch* or Nietzschean ideal type had no need of 'superfluous people', Gast enumerated the number of people that Epicurus required in order to supply him with his simple diet of goat cheese (goat herder, dairymaid, cheesemaker, carter, retailer, etc).

In short, as a dependent, rational animal, Nietzsche, like all of us, needed food and clothing for survival, and money to purchase such items. His travels, his very writings, were only made possible because he lived in a society—a *polis*—within which the normal requirements for the life of an intellectual and writer *and a higher vertebrate animal* could be met. And that matrix of societal relationships and functions required, in turn a plethora of MacIntyre's practices. Such practices required the virtues for, without them, how could Nietzsche be assured that when he ordered opium or chlorate hydrate from his chemist, he would not be supplied with talcum powder or rat poison. Nietzsche was, by the necessities of his animal nature *wholly* dependent on the operation of a society which in turn, could not be held together without the virtues. *The Übermensch*, it turns out, still has to submit to the exigencies of nature —and nurture.

Some consequences of the breakdown of the traditional moral order.

As I indicated at the start of this essay, MacIntyre's account differs from my own attempted synopsis in that he follows a different sequence. He works backwards from the present, whereas I have done pretty much the opposite.

In his first chapter, Macintyre's draws upon the substance of a famous work in science fiction, *A Canticle for Lebowitz* (Walter Miller, 1959). In some dystopian future, perhaps after a nuclear holocaust, the survivors vow to stamp out the

practice of science so it may never again imperil their future. All scientific books are burnt, the study of science banned, and so on. Then at some later and more enlightened stage, an attempt is made to reconstitute the sciences. But, of course, only scraps of the former sciences have survived—half burnt pages from books, unconnected pieces of equipment, and so on. Nonetheless, from these fragments some sort of scientific enterprise is patched together. But now, of course, the *conte*xt in which these surviving fragments were initially embedded is no longer available.

The adherents of this 'new' science, are of course, blithely unaware of such a context and, from their cobbled together information, produce theories where phlogiston rubs shoulders with neutrinos, dark matter and Bohr atoms. Indeed, their philosophers produce 'philosophies of science' in which, say, some future W.V.O. Quine can argue that all philosophy should become more 'scientific'.

Transfer this scenario to moral philosophy, says MacIntyre, and you have exactly the present state of moral discourse. What we have are mere fragments of a former coherent moral enterprise and yet we use these fragments *as if* they comprised some fully-formed, rational moral schema. But of course the very *diversity* of such moral enterprises today betrays their supposed rationality. They cannot all be right and, lacking a proper context, none of them can be pinned down to some ultimate ground of rationality.

The end result is emotivism masquerading as rational argument. Each side in the interminable debates between utilitarians, neo-Kantians, etc supposes that rationality is on their side. However, as MacIntyre notes, when pressed for detail, the result is generally no more than assertion and raised voices. MacIntyre puts it this way:

> I have … characterized that predicament as one in which the price paid for liberation from what appeared to be the external authority of traditional morality was the loss of any authoritative content from the would-be moral utterances of the newly autonomous agent. Each moral agent now spoke unconstrained by the externalities of divine law, natural teleology or hierarchical authority; but why should anyone else now listen to him?

Another consequence of the incommensurability of modern moral discourse is the rise of the distinctly modern notion of *protes*t. To *protest*, once meant to affirm something- to bear witness to something. Now, as Macintyre explains, it means exactly the opposite:

> But protest is now almost entirely that negative phenomenon which characteristically occurs as a reaction to the alleged invasion of someone's rights in the name of someone else's utility. The self-assertive shrillness of protest arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure that protestors

> can never win an argument, the indignant self-righteousness of protest arises because the facts of incommensurability ensure equally that the protestors can never lose either. Hence the utterance of protest is characteristically addressed to those who already share the protestors' premises.

Note, in the above quote, that protest is the inevitable outcome of the clash between two modern moral schemas—one based on rights, the other on the application of utilitarian principles.

At the very beginning of this essay, I reproduced a quote from MacIntyre concerning the inevitable connection, however distant, between theory and action. And so, with emotivism, you would expect to see some expression of the phenomenon in everyday modern life, not just in abstruse moral debates. Not unexpectedly, MacIntyre spends a good many pages dealing with the social outcomes of emotivism in our dealings with others.

There are, he supposes, three typical *characters* in which the phenomenon of emotivism is clearly at play. I have italicised the word *character* because MacIntyre uses it in a special setting. He asks us to consider the characters in a Japanese Noh play (a Punch and Judy show might have sufficed). As soon as we see and hear such characters, we know roughly what to expect from them. Their role and their character are intermixed These are the types that MacIntyre calls *characters*. They are as MacIntyre says "the moral representatives of their culture and they are so because of the way in which moral and metaphysical ideas and theories assume through them an embodied existence in the social world".

There are, no doubt, many such characters in modernity, but MacIntyre deals with only three—the bureaucratic manager, the therapist, and the aesthete. How then, is their emotivism manifested?

In the case of the manager and the therapist the answer is clear enough. In their respective roles, they lay claim to special knowledge and expertise which, in fact, they do not possess. MacIntyre is not here talking about *specialis*t managers or therapists (e.g. the manager of a small engineering shop who *must* have some detailed engineering background or the physiotherapist who *must* have a good knowledge of the human musculature and skeletal structures). Rather he has in mind (in the case of the manager) a typical graduate of a university course in business management who, by virtue of his or her training is supposed to be equally competent in managing say, a bus company, a brewery, a large chicken farm, or a stockbroking firm.

Since this form of management is clearly divorced from the *nature* of that being managed, exactly what *is* its area of expertise? In can be none other than the ability to successfully manipulate others to compliant modes of behaviour.

And to do this, those others must be treated as means to the manager's own ends and not ends in themselves.

If such management is to be a true 'social science' (which it claims to be), then it must have at its disposal a stock of laws or law-like generalisations (as the natural sciences do) to merit the name 'science'. But it manifestly does not have a stock of such laws and MacIntyre gives many examples of the failures of supposed 'laws' in the social sciences. But precisely because bureaucratic management *does* claim scientific expertise, its operation cannot but involve the expression of emotivism.

Much the same goes for the therapist and I do not propose to elaborate on MacIntyre's arguments here. The interested reader will find a devastating critique in Phillip Rieff's *Triumph of the Therapeutic.* Nonetheless, I cannot resist a mention of that famous *Sunday Observer* columnist, Peter Simple (David Wharton), whose satirical pieces were hugely popular. In the (non-existent) *Grey Book of Glynasbon*, an ancient "wisdom text", the following advice is given under the title 'Three things to avoid': 1. A bottle labelled 'wine-type-wine', 2. A bardic deckchair, and 3. A ginger-bearded interpersonal relations expert.

MacIntyre's third 'character', the aesthete, is an interesting choice. In what way is a rich aesthete given to emotivism? If part of emotivist behaviour implies treating other people merely as means to your own ends, then the aesthete is certainly a candidate. Quoting another writer, MacIntyre calls the aesthete "a consumer of persons". But, for me at least, the case Macintyre makes is not as strong as that for the manager and therapist. What has clearly influenced MacIntyre here, I think, is a particular episode in the history of moral philosophy which centres about the work of G.E. Moore.

In tracing the failure of utilitarianism, MacIntyre notes that one of its last advocates, Henry Sidgwick (late 19th C) ruefully concluded that "where he had hoped to find a cosmos, he found only chaos". At the foundation of moral thinking, he concluded, lie beliefs in statements for the truth of which no further reason can be given. To such statements Sidgwick, gave the name *intuitions*. Then, early in the 20th century, G.E. Moore borrowed the term, presenting his borrowings, MacIntyre tells us "with his own penumbra of bad argument in *Principia Ethica*" [MacIntyre is not adverse to sticking in the knife from time to time].

When the Bloomsbury crowd came across the work, they were thunderstruck with awe and admiration, for what Moore had concluded in *Principia Ethica* was that the essence of intuitionism was that "one's prime objects in life were love, the creation and enjoyment of aesthetic experience and the pursuit of knowledge". This was their own very project—especially the love part [Dorothy

Parker famously said that "They lived in circles, painted in squares and loved in triangles].

Intuitionism was embraced as a philosophical stance with impeccable credentials, so they told themselves. It soon became evident however that this intuitionism was, in fact, no more than a thin disguise for their own selfish actions as "consumers of persons". Here then, was a form of emotivism at work amongst the rich aesthetes of Bloomsbury.

The other source for Macinyre's particular choice of the rich aesthete can be found in famous novels. We have already discussed the aesthete in Kierkegaard's *Either Or*. To this, Macintyre adds the eponymous character in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. Both are 'bad boys', thumbing their nose at conventional morality, and both "lounge so insolently at the entrance to the modern world". Another rather obvious source is Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*. Against such emotivist characters Macintyre places those who appear in the novels of Jane Austen. These characters practice the virtues and represent, at least in some degree, MacIntyre's 'type-specimen' of the well-lived life.

Conclusion

So, having now dealt with the pathologies of modern moral philosophy, what is MacIntyre's 'take home message'? In fact he does offer any clear pathway out of our dilemma. At the end of the day, he says, we have two choices—Nietzsche or Aristotle. That is to say, we can opt for precisely the sort of rampant individualism that we see all around us, or we can embrace the virtues as the only real and permanent avenue for human fulfilment.

I find it strange, to say the least, that today's promoters of the Darwinist schema for humans have little to say on this matter. It seems clear that the social units of the family and the *polis* (whether the latter be a tribe, a village, or a city-state) have historically provided the only clear way in which the human species can thrive. When the early Greeks pronounced their admiration for the social organisation of the beehive, they surely thereby showed some deep knowledge of the human condition and human vulnerability in nature. That man is a social animal has been recognised since the dawn of civilisation. That liberal individualism, with its attendant emotivist philosophies, directly opposes this fact ought to be equally obvious.

In the liberal version of multiculturalism, every culture must be praised and nurtured *except* that culture from which the whole liberal tradition itself emerged as a sort of mutant species (to continue with our Darwinian schema). There is a good deal of self-hate here. Liberalism, after all, can be seen as a Christian heresy.

MacIntyre's vision for the immediate future is bleak. He does not suppose that our present circumstances compare directly with those of 4th C Rome, but he does suppose that there is an historical precedent in the figure of St Benedict. Just as Benedict fled the dying Rome and set up his little community in the desert, so might it be that we will need some similar sort of figure. Our barbarians are not at the gate, they are already amongst us. Unlike Benedict, though, we cannot flee the city.

There is, in fact, quite a diverse group of mainly younger intellectuals who take MacIntyre seriously, and are seeking ways in which, what we once called the western tradition, can survive. Rod Dreher's *The Benedict Option* is just one example. One of the things that characterises this group is their political stance. They stand equally apart from the Left and the Right. Their conservatism, if one can really call it that, is not Burkean conservatism. It is much older and goes all the way back to Plato. They are post-liberal and pre-conservative at the same time.

Then again, of course, there are a great many people today who think that what we call "the western tradition" is an anachronism—something to be ashamed of, and something we must jettison. Every day, we see new assaults on concepts that only a couple of decades ago, were considered to be beyond argument. Little by little, the edifice of the *polis* is crumbling. This, they take to be a measure of progress toward some Brave New World of supposed unlimited freedom—a "freedom from reality" (to borrow the title of a recent book by D.C. Schindler).

Against such sentiments and developments what can one say. Not very much. I can think only of that lone figure of Dr Johnson standing among the ruins of Ionia and later writing "That man is little to be envied whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona".

And so we await, as MacIntyre says, another and doubtless very different St Benedict. But we cannot wait in inaction Each of us, in our own little social setting, must sow what seeds of truth we can. The exact mechanics of how this is done are beyond my scope here and perhaps will require a great deal more careful thought. Some have suggested a model not unlike that used by the underground resistance in some of the former Soviet satellite countries. Whatever the case, while we wait certain words St Matthew's Gospel ring in our minds—"Behold I am with you all days, even unto the end of the world".

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF FRANCIS RATCLIFFE (1907-1970)

Dick Smith's *Australian Geographic* is one of those well-produced, glossy magazines that you will find in the sitting room of better class guest houses and doctor's waiting rooms (perhaps less commonly in the rooms of those surgeries which have bulk-billing). It is avidly read by the sort of people who use global positioning systems to plan their bushwalking and always build minimum impact campfires. I happened to browse through the correspondence pages of an old edition recently and was greatly taken by one letter on the subject of introduced pest animals. The correspondent was a bit miffed that an earlier article on pests in Australia had missed out on "the greatest pest of all, *Homo sapiens*". To which we all must apparently reply "*Mea maxima culpa*"! It was while reflecting upon this sad and all too prevalent attitude that I decided to write something about a pioneer conservationist in Australia, Francis Ratcliffe.

I was first introduced to the writings of Francis Ratcliffe via the old *Victorian School Reader*—that remarkable series of school books which introduced the power of the written word to two generations of Victorians and allowed the writings of Lawson, Paterson, John O'Brien and a host of other Australian authors and poets to rub shoulders with Shakespeare, Dickens, Wordsworth and Tennyson. When I saw an extract from Ratcliffe's *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand* lined up with the 'greats' of the English language, my youthful mind assumed that he was some sort of literary genius on a par with them. In fact, Ratcliffe was not a writer by trade, but an ecologist (before that word became popular). I was to gain a more rounded appreciation of the man in later life when I myself began a career in animal ecology and met many of Ratcliffe's colleagues (Ratcliffe himself had retired by this time).

Ratcliffe's only book (I exclude scientific publications), *Flying Fox & Drifting Sand*, was published in Great Britain in 1938. It was first published in Australia in 1947 by Angus & Robertson with reprints in 1948, 1951, 1953, and a Sirius Books reprint in 1963. The book is an account of his early (1929-1936) travels in Australia while employed by the then Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (now CSIRO). His job was to report on the economic impact of Flying Foxes (species of large frugivorous bats) on the fruit industry along the eastern seaboard and, later, to investigate the problem of sand drift and desertification in the arid pastoral lands of South Australia and Queensland.

Flying Fox and Drifting Sand seems to have been written by extracting or modifying passages from his letters home during the early 1930s. Although he did keep a diary, this by his own admission, was "rather scrappy". He was a prolific and careful letter writer with many letters exceeding fifteen typed pages. Carbon copies held at the National Library have long sections with margins marked and most of these appear almost unchanged in the book.

It is a marvellous account of the Australian scene in the 1930s, particularly of its wildlife and of the people in the Outback. In style and to a lesser extent content, *Flying Fox* bears some similarities to the writings of both Frank Clune (1893-1971) and Ion Idriess (1889-1979). At the time of Ratcliffe's first publication (1938), Clune had already published *Rolling Down the Lachlan* (1935), *Roaming Round the Darling (*1936) and a number of other 'travel' books dealing with the Australian outback and its people. Likewise, Idriess had published *Flynn of the Inland* (1932) and *The Cattle King* (1936).

The style of imaginatively re-created conversations which characterise these works is also to be found in *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*, though to a lesser degree, and it is very possible that Ratcliffe was influenced by these enormously popular works of his contemporaries. This notion is given more credence by the following short extract from a letter to his mother in 1930—"In view of the fact that I am toying with the idea of a book myself, I should like any modern books on travel." However, those who were closely associated with Ratcliffe (and I am thinking particularly of his colleague at CSIRO, B.V. "Bunny" Fennessy) have commented to me regarding his remarkable memory for past conversations and details of scenes.

What puts Ratcliffe in a class of his own though, is his power of description when dealing with natural history. In his introduction to the first edition of *Flying Fox*, Sir Julian Huxley (Ratcliffe's old Oxford mentor) makes mention of this and quotes some memorable passages, one of which is worth repeating here:

> Galahs are lovely things Their breasts and underparts are of varying shades of rich rose. Their backs and wings are bluish grey. Sometimes, when the light falls on them, this colour looks almost as pale as clean smoke—rather like the colour which the sky assumes when there is a haze on the horizon. At all times of the day galahs can be seen in twos and threes sailing about with their easy but unsteady flight, but it is in the evening that they provide their great spectacle. At the close of day they gather together in flocks, and fly about in mass formations like so many of the parrot tribe. And with every swift change of direction the birds take on a different hue. One moment they will be flying down the light, a cloud of grey ghosts barely visible against the eastern sky. Then in a flash they will reel round towards

> the sun; and it seems for all the world as if a new flock had suddenly come into being, as though solid bird bodies had been created out of nothing but the thin air and the sunset colours.

Galahs seem to have been a favourite with Ratcliffe. In another section of the book, his powers of observation are evident as he describes a feeding flock:

> There was a way in which they rose off the ground when they were unalarmed and just bobbing about with nothing particular to do. A mob of several dozen, or perhaps several hundred, would be strutting about the plain. Suddenly, as if they were passive and light as thistledown and a puff of wind has disturbed them, they would open their wings and be wafted gently up into the air, and then all settle down again.

The other prominent characteristic of the book is Ratcliffe's genuine admiration for the men and women of the Outback and his understanding of their lives and aspirations. Although you will find good character descriptions in both Clune and Idriess, few other writers in the 'outback travel & adventure' genre have shown such a depth of understanding of rural Australians as Ratcliffe. His descriptions were not always kind but they were accurate.

Indeed, a large part of Ratcliffe's success as an applied ecologist stems from his understanding of the relationship between landowner and land. Ratcliffe knew that the price of progress in pastoralism, agriculture and silviculture was the inevitable retreat of an earlier, more idyllic Australia but he was equally insistent that an approach (now recognised by the overworn phrase 'ecologically sustainable development') of careful management was required—one which took account of the millions of years of slow evolution—to prevent the permanent destruction of fragile ecosystems.

One interesting feature of Ratcliffe's book is his unashamed anthropomorphism in describing the denizens of the bush and plain. Those who had first read Ratcliffe's scientific works (notably his early treatises on Flying Foxes and soil erosion) might well be dismayed by what they would see as an otherwise sober scientist stooping to soppy sentimentalism. To make matters worse, the man was an avowed rationalist! Ratcliffe's animals are cheeky, proud, thoughtful, sad or happy, even exuberant. Here, for example, is Ratcliffe's account of the antics of his old favourites—a flock of Galahs:

> Lastly, I found that galahs had a rollicking sense of fun. One only has to watch them around the house to realise this. A flock will appear from nowhere, and after fluttering about and shouting at one another for a while, will make straight for the wireless aerial. Some will perch on the aerial wire itself, and after doing a short balancing stunt with flapping wings, will grab on with their beaks and start turning back somersaults. Others will settle on top of the sloping wires which support the mast, and slide down them one

by one. Those that do not happen to be performing at any given moment fly around teasing and cheering on their companions...

How much better than the tedious, mechanistic description of some modern day animal behaviourist who will explain it all away in terms of territorial defence, mating strategy, etc. Hardy's *Darkling Thrush* is far more believable than Dawkin's "Selfish Gene". Not only is the anthropomorphic account more appealing, it is also more likely to give ordinary men and women a better appreciation of the profound beauty of the natural world around them and the need to respect it. We should recall that the early animal vivisectionists, so loathed by Dr Johnson, justified their actions via what they thought to be a totally rational Cartesian philosophy. Their 'rational' minds, purged of all pity and sense of shared existence with the lower animals, allowed them to ignore the agonised cries of pain from their helpless subjects.

There are other word pictures in Ratcliffe's non-scientific writings (particularly in his letters home to his parents) which are of great descriptive power. Here, for example is the sunset as seen from the window of a 'dogbox' on the rail line from Nambour in 1930: "The familiar eerie frieze of the nightfall in the bush seemed like a breath of the past. As we creaked and bumped northward I watched through the window the delicate tracery of the trees pass by, silhouetted against the band of copper and gold and daffodil yellow that lay on the western horizon. Then, just indigo night and the stars."

Flying Fox & Drifting Sand was an immensely popular book in its day. Half a century ago, the travel book was the only means by which most ordinary Australians could really gain some insight into the people and places of the Back Country. Today, all that has changed. Sealed roads, comfortable cars, motels and caravan parks have opened the vast interior to everyone. The sense of mystery and romance associated with the Bush has gone and with it, much of the appeal of the travel book. It has been replaced by the television 'documentary' where four-wheel drive jockeys, with full camera crew in tow (and usually, a comely female assistant at hand) 'discover' the outback and its wildlife.

For all of its power and accuracy in bringing scenes of the outback to our living rooms, the television camera lacks the ability to excite the imagination in the same way as the written word. I can remember as a young boy and an avid reader of Idriess, Clune, Banjo Paterson and others, visualising some sort of other world "out back" with big-hearted drovers behind the crawling mob, coolabah trees, starlit plains, champion horses, faithful dogs, teeming wildlife and wily swagmen. I imagined a sort of water-deficient heaven studded with names from Banjo Patterson poems—Come-by-Chance, The Overflow, Kileys Run, and so

on. It was an antipodean Ithaca—the longed-for True Home, which never really existed but which, nonetheless conveyed certain truths about us as all good legends do.

Despite being somewhat dated as most of these earlier travel books are today, Ratcliffe's sensitive account of his travels through deserts, rainforests and idyllic islands deserves a permanent place in our literature, if only to remind us of the hardships endured by our forebears and the achievements made in the teeth of adversity. It also provides a valuable insight into the way in which ordinary, non-urban Australians thought and acted in the 1930s. In addition to the individual characters appearing in his book, Ratcliffe attempted to summarise the 'outback Australian' in some of his letters home. Here is an example from an early letter written when the twenty-six year old Ratcliffe had only been in the country for about six months:

> These country folk are numerically at a disadvantage compared with the urban population, but they must play a great part in the moulding of the national character. Taken as a whole they are rather a nice crowd. Their life is rough, and they are often rough to meet it. They are not for the most part courteous or easy of approach; but when the barrier is passed they usually turn out to be bluntly kind and even generous, particularly the womenfolk. The wives seem to lack the almost crude assertiveness of their husbands—that "I'm as good as any man" aura that is so unpleasantly noticeable. They are hopeless to argue with, these men. I have long ago given up the attempt. I merely sit and listen, and cull from their dissertation such information as I want, and do my best to lead the talk along the lines that will bring it out.

While *Flying Fox & Drifting Sand* dealt with the problems of vertebrate pests and soil erosion at a more popular level, the detailed results of Ratcliffe's early investigations were published as more serious scientific works in a series of CSIR scientific bulletins. These remain as standard reference works and many of their findings and suggested courses of action remain as relevant today as they were at the time of publication in the 1930s.

This is particularly true of the papers dealing with soil erosion in the arid interior. Ratcliffe was one of the early voices to raise concerns about the wisdom of permanent pastoral settlement on some desert fringe areas and repeatedly spoke of the need to adjust stocking rates so that they remained in equilibrium with the native vegetation. In essence, the correct stocking rate was one which allowed survival of vegetation during the inevitable droughts. Importantly, in drawing his conclusions, the young Ratcliffe had taken the time to confer at length with the men and women of the outback who, as he knew, possessed a wealth of

experience and local knowledge. Thus, his careful findings not only accorded with the known science, but with the common experience of older hands in the regions under study.

Sometime in the 1950s, Ratcliffe was appointed as Director of a new Division within the old Council for Scientific and Industrial Research—the Division of Wildlife Research. It was in this role that Ratcliffe contributed most to a better understanding of both indigenous wildlife and introduced pests in Australia. Ratcliffe's approach to any new problem handed over for study by his little band of scientists was always the same—before the problem can be solved, its exact nature and dimensions must be known. Nowhere was this better exemplified than in his approach to rabbit control. By the late 1940s, rabbits had become a serious problem over huge areas of southern Australia. Ratcliffe and his small team of researchers set about on a systematic study of the biology of the rabbit. This was to lay the foundation for an informed approach to control. Before this time, each landholder had his own theory of control and most of these were based on mere fancy. There were some famous examples. During the 1920s, W.M. Rodier, something of a snake oil merchant, had spent considerable energies and advertising money on a novel control scheme based about the selective removal of male rabbits. The theory was that the few remaining males would harass the females to death.

By contrast, Ratcliffe's group armed themselves with a thorough understanding of the behaviour of the animal and, with this knowledge, were able to promote more effective field control techniques, particularly in the area of baiting. Nor was their approach one of scientific aloofness. His earlier exposure to rural Australians had taught Ratcliffe the importance of getting the message out into the field. In the case of rabbit control, Ratcliffe appointed one of his team, B.V. (Bunny) Fennessy as a sort of roving ambassador to preach the new gospel of effective control. Fennessy went out to the State vertebrate pest control agencies and the farming communities with a hands on approach—organising field days, training courses and information nights.

★ ★ ★ ★

The history of the introduction and spread of myxomatosis disease in Australia is well chronicled by Professor Frank Fenner and Francis Ratcliffe in their scholarly book *Myxomatosis*, published in 1965. Both Fenner and Ratcliffe were to play an important role in the research, the former as a virologist and the latter as a research administrator in CSIRO. But the name most commonly associated with the introduction is that of the late Dame Jean Macnamara. In fact, Dame Jean

played little role at all in the research associated with the disease but she was very active in the political arena and certainly championed the cause of introduction and deliberate spread. Without her influence, it is doubtful if the early field trials which culminated in the spectacular (and unplanned) outbreak in the summer of 1950/1 would have taken place. As might be expected, in taking this course, she was cheered on by the farming community and the old Country Party elements. Most of the scientists (including Ratcliffe) actively involved took a more cautious approach, because all of the early research in Australia pointed to a fairly limited transmission of the virus in the field and, therefore, a limited potential as a self-perpetuating and widespread disease agent. The end result was a fair amount of tension between CSIRO (particularly Francis Ratcliffe) and Dame Jean—to the extent that Francis once described Dame Jean as seeing him in terms of "a boil on the bum of progress". In the event, the scientists were wrong and the disease took off spectacularly in 1951.

This whole episode is dealt with in a reasonably even-handed way by Desmond Zwar in his biography of Dame Jean *(The Dame*, Macmillan Books, 1984). She was a formidable opponent, expert in the art of applying political pressure and manoeuvring behind the scenes. Some of the criticisms voiced by the pro myxo camp though, were quite unfair. It was suggested that CSIRO and Ratcliffe in particular, had thrown in the towel and shelved the whole idea of using the virus. This is simply not true, as any perusal of the records will show. Moreover, some of Dame Jean's manoeuvres were a little Machiavellian, to say the least. My own former boss, the late Geoff Douglas (at that time scientific member of the old Vermin & Noxious Weeds Destruction Board in Victoria) openly admitted that "We'd give Dame Jean the ammunition and she'd go out and fire it" (*The Dame*, pg 100). In fact, it seems very likely that Dame Jean arranged for Douglas to be installed in his influential post in Victoria (*The Dame* pg 101). I got to know Geoff fairly well in the late 1960s and still regard him highly. However, while he was a man of great vision in some regards and did a lot of good for rabbit control in the State (including the establishment of a well-equipped research facility at Frankston, near Melbourne), there was no doubt that he could be very political at times. As a scientist and former employee of Ratcliffe's, he would have known that his enthusiastic support of Dame Jean was hurtful to Ratcliffe. There is also no question in my mind that his support rested on influences other than a purely scientific analysis of the data at hand.

In a sense, subsequent history has vindicated the Ratcliffe approach. Part of his concern and his differences with Dame Jean related to the natural tendency of farmers to see myxo as the silver bullet—the end of the rabbit problem. Ratcliffe

knew better and so did Fenner. After the spectacular success of myxomatosis in the early fifties, genetic resistance to the disease quickly developed. They cautioned against heavily reliance on the disease and Ratcliffe, in particular, pushed strongly for the implementation of other control measures. He saw the need for a committed effort on the part of the whole farming community.

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The germ of an idea for "a conservation foundation for Australia" was contained in the text of a presidential address given by Ratcliffe to the Ecological Society of Australia in 1964. Five or six years earlier, Ratcliffe in company with John Calaby (another legendary figure in the wildlife scene) had gone to the Upper Clarence region of NSW on a fauna survey matter associated with cattle ticks and was astounded by the range of mammals present. He felt that part of the country should be made into a fauna reserve so that this great diversity could be protected into the future. But funding and administration would pose real problems. And so arose the idea of some national, non-government foundation or trust to stimulate interest in conservation and solicit contributions from private donors throughout the whole of Australia.

In fact, the opportunity to launch the "conservation foundation" came in 1964 as a result of some more heady matters of State. Due to an impending visit from the Duke of Edinburgh (president of the World Wildlife Fund's national appeal in Britain), the Official Secretary at Government House hastily called together a Committee(which included Ratcliffe) to discuss the possibility of Australia becoming a contributing member of the WWF. This informal committee continued on and really became the first committee of the ACF, largely through the efforts of Ratcliffe .

The first president of the Foundation was Sir Garfield Barwick and in Dec 1966 he issued a letter to editors of all major Australian newspapers detailing the aims of the ACF and calling on ordinary Australians to enrol in the Foundation and to support its causes. The functions of the ACF were to:

1. Educate and interest the public in conservation problems
2. Keep itself informed of conservation developments in all the Australian states and overseas.
3. Support conservation schemes needing special encouragement.
4. Seek funds by public appeal
5. Strive at all times to develop and express an informed, balanced and responsible opinion on questions in which it decides to take an active interest.

Importantly, the charter of the ACF went beyond the preservation of native fauna and flora. "It is concerned with the utilisation of all the natural resources of

the country—its soils and waters, its forests, crops and pastures and the stock and wild animals that depend upon them… At a time when increasing production is called for, which will boomerang unless it can be maintained, our land and its resources must be handled with understanding and restraint if they are to provide for the various needs of our growing population in years to come".

Note here, the emphasis on sensible resource use and the acceptance of growth and development as an inevitable consequence of European occupation of the land.

The first list of members is a veritable who's who of well-known Australians at the time—wildlife administrators in the States, prominent lawyers, captains of industry, pastoralists, and high-order administrators. It is really a testament to Ratcliffe's power as an organiser and communicator that he was able to pull together such a seemingly disparate group under one banner and a common goal

Here I must digress to recount a small incident concerning one of those founding members, Alf Butcher, who was the then Director of Fisheries and Wildlife in Victoria. Alf was a stickler for detail regarding the way his name was to be presented in official documents—always as "A. Dunbavin Butcher". The story goes that some poor scribe, in typing up the Minutes of a meeting somewhere, got it wrong and referred to him in the Minutes as "Mr. A. Dunbavin, butcher of fisheries & wildlife".

But Ratcliffe's dream of a popular conservation movement involving Australians from all walks of life and sharing a common set of goals was not to last. It was shattered within three years of his death. The great revolt of the young during and after the Vietnam War and the heady years of Whitlam brought with it a different interpretation of the word 'conservation'. The world was no longer to be centred about humans but about the Earth Mother. Conservation became confused with preservation and the Great Wilderness Myth joined Woodstock and politics in an alliance which was to unseat the 'old school' which Ratcliffe had pulled together. The cause for which Ratcliffe and his contemporaries had fought so hard was suddenly conflated with a myriad of other causes—Ban the Bomb, Gay Liberation, World Peace, and so on. I saw a bumper sticker once which said it all—"Landrights for Gay Whales".

In 1973, at the AGM of the ACF, a group of mainly younger members successfully unseated what they saw as an overly conservative 'old boy' network which, in their eyes had sold out to miners, woodchippers, graziers and other exploiters of Mother Nature. It was a less than edifying coup, overtly political, which saw an unceremonious changing of the guard. Many of the old school simply walked away, never to return. Some put up a valiant counterattack, but

the battle was effectively over. Frank Fenner delivered a paper to the 1973 meeting of the Foundation entitled "Conspiracy in the ACF: A case study of the manipulation of meetings and the politicising of a non-political body". Time has healed many of the wounds. Later in the 1970s, Frank Fenner was invited to become President of the ACF. Although he declined, it was for reasons quite unrelated to his earlier indignation.

The great pity is that in Ratcliffe who was by this time dead, the angry young men and women of the New Ecology, had a sympathetic ally. Where they differed was not on the need for conservation but on what it really meant and the way to achieve it. Forty years earlier he had written the following in one of his letters home: "The land wears its heart on its sleeve, and it is a broken heart at that. Man's unbeautifying hand is everywhere—you can see it in the prone trunks and blackened stumps, the hideous houses, and the gashes in the hilldsides, like ugly red scars." The difference was, at bottom, one of where humans were placed in the scheme of things. To the new school, man was little more than a naked ape which had got out of control and was hell bent on destroying a world which belonged to him no more than it belonged to termites or sea urchins. To Ratcliffe and his school, man was at the centre and conservation could not ignore his needs. Without him, there was no 'wilderness', no 'ecological balance'—these were human concepts. It was man, and man alone who could put a value on nature. As Les Murray has pointed out, "the kangaroo does not know about Australia".

Despite all of Francis Ratcliffe's scientific achievements—and there were many—there is little doubt that he will be largely remembered as the author of *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*, rightly regarded as an Australian classic. However those of his friends and colleagues who are still alive will remember him for his humility, his genuine friendship, his love of the Australian bush and, above all, his immense understanding of the human condition. His work on conservation and related issues was recognised by the award, in 1957, of an OBE and, in 1966, the conferring of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science by the Australian National University.

BUNYIPS AND THE BOULIA LIGHTS

Cryptozoology and the Paranormal

The great thing about life is that you can discover something new every day. Today I discovered cryptids. Rather, I should say that I discovered the word, not what it signifies. For what it signifies is strange animals—Bigfoot, the Yowie, the Bunyip, *et hoc genus omne*—and these are by no means novel. Everyone has heard of them. As you might have guessed, there is now a special discipline called cryptozoology (there may be a uni degree to be had here, I must check it out) and lots of people with time on their hands but not much on their minds call themselves cryptozoologists.

The cryptids, of course, are not a modern phenomenon. They have been around for millennia. If you want a good account of early cryptifauna (if I may drop a neologism here) then you cannot go past Aelian's *On the Characteristics of Animals*. He wrote his treatise circa 200 AD and, in addition to straightforward descriptions of quite ordinary animals, there are some very interesting cryptids. In fact, Aelian was a sort of forerunner to Ripley's *Believe it or Not* and his book is a marvellous read. He has a very good account of fly fishing by the way and it appears that, in this sport, nothing much has changed over the last two thousand years. Even Pliny the Elder has a few interesting beasts but other authors like Strabo are early empiricists and dismiss all this sort of stuff. Homer's Scylla, Sirens, and Cyclopes are probably the first recorded cryptids in Western literature.

Of all the ancient cryptifauna, my personal favourite is the Halcyon. In fact this bird, mentioned by both Pliny and Aelian, is a small kingfisher. What makes the ancient Halcyon something of a cryptid though is the early description of its nesting habits. The bird was reputed to nest on the ocean during a period of calm weather around the winter solstice. Here is Pliny's description:

> They breed at midwinter, on what are called 'the kingfisher days', during which the sea is calm and navigable, especially in the neighbourhood of Sicily. They make their nests a week before the shortest day, and lay a week after it. Their nests are admired for their shape, that of a ball slightly projecting with a very narrow mouth, resembling a very large sponge; they cannot be cut with a knife, but break at a strong blow, like dry sea foam; and it cannot be discovered of what they are constructed ... They lay five eggs.

What is intriguing is Pliny's very full description of the nest. Our Sacred Kingfisher, *Halcyon sancta*, is named after the fabled bird mentioned by Pliny and Aelian. The account of the nesting habits has given us the term 'halcyon days' as describing calm and settled times. The origin of the word 'halcyon' is in Greek mythology. Alcyone [Halcyon] was the daughter of Aeolus (king of the winds) who found her husband, Ceyx, drowned and, overcome with grief, cast herself into the sea where she too drowned. The gods rewarded her devotion by turning her into a kingfisher, and Aeolus (or, perhaps, Zeus) forbade the winds to blow during the 'Halcyon Days', the seven days before and the seven after the winter solstice, when legend has it that the kingfisher lays its eggs. Ceyx was also changed into a bird, but the love between the two remained. This is why both species of bird were commonly supposed to fly together. In Australia, our Azure Kingfisher used to be called *Ceyx azurea* but I think the taxonomists changed it. You cannot really blame them though. If they did not keep changing species names they would be out of a job. The original Greek account of the bird led both Henry Purcell and Eric Coates to write musical pieces (*Halcyon Days*) on the theme.

But do not be fooled into thinking that belief in cryptids has waned since the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment. On the contrary, it is flourishing as never before. It seems that as the ability of modern science to 'explain' the natural world around us increases, so too does our need for the inexplicable. To put it another way, a world in which everything is explained and familiarised becomes very boring and people cast about for an experience of 'strangeness'. This is not quite the same as that experience of what Professor Rudolph Otto famously called "the numinous". The latter refers to some apprehension of an order of reality which is "totally other" (*ganz andere*). Otto supposes the apprehension of "The Holy" to be of this sort. Cryptids and other unexplained phenomena are not like that at all. They are natural phenomena awaiting full scientific description and the whole delicious experience for the cryptozoologists and students of the paranormal is in putting forward theories of explanation. In fact, a good working description of a cryptid would be of an animal that is often seen but never captured or quantified in any way. Alternatively, you could think of cryptids in Aristotelian terms as potentiality without actuality.

Perhaps one of the best generalised descriptions of such beasts comes from Robert Graves. He once wrote a poem called *The Welsh Incident* and it typifies the whole approach to the reporting of cryptids:

> 'But that was nothing to what things came out
> From the sea-caves of Criccieth yonder.'
> 'What were they? Mermaids? Dragons? Ghosts?'

'Nothing at all of any things like that.'
'What were they, then?'
'All sorts of queer things,
Things never seen or heard or written about,
Very strange, un-Welsh, utterly peculiar
Things. Oh, solid enough they seemed to touch,
Had anyone dared it. Marvellous creation,
All various shapes and sizes, and no sizes,
All new, each perfectly unlike his neighbour,
Though all came moving slowly out together.'
'Describe just one of them.'
'I am unable.'
… [and so on]

As the poem continues, we learn a lot about the circumstances, but absolutely nothing about the animals.

The other thing to notice about modern belief in this sort of stuff is the seemingly inverse relationship between education and credulity. That is to say, as universal education has become a reality and university degrees for all is just around the corner, irrational beliefs seem to flourish as never before. Think of witchcraft, for instance. Television shows like *Bewitched, Charmed,* and *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* are hugely popular and I'm told that covens are springing up all over the place. Then there are the old comic book heroes—Batman, Superman, etc.—now turning up in serious movies for adults. But the best indicator of our increasing credulity is the television commercial. All sorts of impossible situations and impossible happenings are presented in support of some product. If you want to tell me that we don't really take any notice of this rubbish then I need to know why the purveyors of these products persist in wasting their money on ineffectual ads. Perhaps Chesterton was right in his characterisation of our age:

> This is a psychological age, which is the opposite of an intellectual age. It is not a question of persuading men, but of suggesting how they are persuaded. It is an age of suggestion; that is, of appeal to the irrational part of man.

I suspect that if you studied the matter closely, you would find that nearly every country has its own endemic cryptifauna. North America has bigfoot. In the Himalayas they have the yeti. Australia is particularly well endowed because in addition to the yowie and the bunyip, we have the black panther, sometimes simply referred to as the giant cat. Furthermore, there remains the last lingering hope for rediscovery of the thylacine in Tasmania and this animal has actually

taken on the status of a cryptid. Recent discussion of the possibility of reconstituting the animal (so to speak) via genetic engineering technology only serves to add to interest in the beast.

Without question, the black panther or giant cat is now the most keenly discussed cryptid in Australia. The poor old bunyip is only a memory, kept alive by a few 'older Australians' (there are no elderly folk these days) of the sort that wear peaked caps, sit on park benches, and menace passers-by with their walking sticks and other prosthetic devices. The demise of the bunyip is particularly sad, made all the more so by the fact that its heritage is a very ancient one. The Aborigines knew the bunyip long before Europeans came. For a time after European settlement, the animal was an important part of our folk history. It even entered the political sphere. In 1853, W.C. Wentworth put forward a proposal for a colonial peerage. D.H. Deniehy, a well-known public figure at the time and later a politician, was not impressed and he gave this famous riposte:

> Here they all knew the common water mole was transformed into the duck-billed platypus, and in some distant emulation of this degeneration, he supposed they were to be favoured with a bunyip aristocracy.

The term 'bunyip aristocracy' took hold and you will still hear it from time to time, even today. I read that some boffins have recently decided that the bunyip of Aboriginal legend is merely the common seal which sometimes makes its way far inland along the waterways. I'm not sure that I would trust this explanation. Think what would happen if the platypus had remained undiscovered until just yesterday and you or I phoned up the boffins with a description of what we had seen. They would immediately send around a padded van with a couple of muscular gentleman to assist us to the nearest mental health facility.

We had a bunyip scare in our district when I was a boy. Our farm and the farms of several of our neighbours backed on to a large water storage reservoir which was a favourite haunt of waterfowl of diverse kinds. Early one morning, a neighbour rang on our old 'party line' telephone. She was clearly in a state of panic and frightened out of her wits. "There's a bunyip down in the water", she said. At this point, my mother thought it wise to hand the phone over to my father. Having survived a stint over on the Somme in 1917, he was a man who was not easily excited by things a little out of the ordinary. After calming the neighbour down, he asked her to describe the beast in some detail. Her account was sufficiently detailed to raise his interest mildly, and he decided to go down to the water and inspect the bunyip with his own eyes. When he came back he was smiling. "Bloody musk duck", he said to my mother.

In fact, when the musk ducks (*Biziura lobata*) first came to our district in the 1950s, most locals had never experienced them before and more than a few people were perplexed by what they saw. We had the advantage of owning

Neville Cayley's *What Bird is That*? The male bird is our largest duck. It lies fairly low in the water, often showing little more than its large head with a pendulous 'dewlap' beneath its bill. It just doesn't look right. Moreover, the male bird has a very strange habit of kicking the water violently from time to time, thereby producing a very impressive waterspout visible hundreds of metres away. The accompanying noise, almost like an explosion, can be heard at a very great distance. So strange is the musk duck that it has been given a genus name all to itself, unlike most other waterbirds.

But, as I say, the bunyip is a has-been. The cryptids of the moment are the giant cats. Of course, some of them have been around for a while too. The Tantanoola tiger, for instance, must be getting a bit grey around the chops now. Perhaps he (or she) found a mate and brought up a family because these animals definitely seem to be on the increase. And not just down Tantanoola way. The big cats are turning up all over the continent in increasing numbers. I have even come across reports of giant cats with offspring in tow. The story of their origin is almost as well known as the *Book of Genesis*. While there are some variant accounts, the main explanations lie with either the escape of a circus panther in the dim past, or of a straying Armed Forces mascot which fled its masters and 'went bush'. The American Air Force is commonly held responsible and, in this case, the animal in question is termed a cougar or mountain lion.

The way in which these animals operate is somewhat akin to the 'electron capture' theory given in my old school science book. I vaguely remember a principle given in American backwoods slang as "them as has gets". In other words, the more electrons an entity has, the more it can attract. For the cryptids, this translates as "one sighting engenders many more". You could see it as a variant of the old 'spontaneous generation' theory. There is one important difference though. Our remote ancestors supposed that you needed the right conditions to generate say, mice—plenty of food and a nice pile of rubbish in the corner. With the giant cats though, the question of habitat suitability seems not to arise. In my part of the world (north-central Victoria) for instance, the big cats show up in some pretty harsh bushland. It's the type of country where even the lizards always carry a cut lunch and all the crows are just skin and bone. And yet, these very large felids, each requiring several kilos of good quality meat daily, can live and breed quite happily. What is even more remarkable, they can do so without leaving any hard evidence behind except the odd footprint.

And so, typically, there is a single sighting reported in the local paper, followed in the matter of days by a whole rash of such events. Sometimes, photos of indistinct footprints accompany the news items. Invariably, the cats turn up when other news is scarce. I can speak with some authority here because, as a former government zoologist, I was often approached by reporters and cryptozoologists in search of a 'scientific' comment. Sadly, my comments rarely impressed and the

enquirers moved on to that much more reliable and reasonable commentator, Mr A. Spokesman. Finally, the whole affair became too much for me and I decided to 'come clean' and publish the awful truth. It was a cathartic experience and, in the end, I just could not bring myself to posting the letter. Here is the content of the letter:

> Old Bofors is still alive! I see that a Maldon resident spotted him only the other day (*Bendigo Advertiser*, 11/2/97) partaking of a cool libation at some local waterhole. Understandably enough, she mistook him for a cougar. I should now explain to bemused readers that Bofors was my old, mixed-breed tomcat which went missing about 45 years ago. He gained the name of Bofors because of his uncanny ability to bring down native birds on the wing from very considerable heights. How he did it is another story. Anyway, he is obviously still in the land of the living as I would recognise his paw prints anywhere. Besides, he was large and black, exactly fitting the description given by our Maldon resident.
>
> I am not at all surprised that as the *Advertiser* says "the animal has never been photographed". Old Bofors hated cameras. Indeed, this was the reason that he left our company all those years ago. I remember the day well. My young niece had one of those old-type flash cameras that emit a horribly loud bang and a cloud of acrid smoke when fired. Old Bofors, who had suffered shell shock during the second Marne Offensive of 1918, immediately went bush and has never returned.
>
> Mind you, this is not the first time Old Bofors has showed himself to civilisation in the last 45 years. There was a veritable epidemic of sightings a few years back, due to a lull in Royal scandals, stockmarket crashes, bigamous clergy and other newsworthy items. For a time, I even believed that he had teamed up with a member of the opposite sex (although in our company he was remarkably abstemious). Several ~~backwoodsmen~~ backwoodspersons in the St Arnaud area had reported a large cat, wearing the *Croix de Guerre* and with kittens in tow, swimming the Nine Mile Creek. Farmers also reported a large increase in stock depredation at the time (particularly Hereford cattle and Clydesdale horses) and this accorded with an obvious increase in food requirements when you are raising a family.
>
> I also suspected that Old Bofors and his children (there must have been quite a few of them by this time) had adopted some disagreeable modern habits. From the geographical range of sightings (some almost contemporaneous at locations far removed from each other), and from certain other evidence, I concluded that the "Bofors Gang" as I called them, had taken to riding Harley Davidsons. One night, some sleepy little township up Charlton way would suddenly be invaded—chooks killed and scattered, bull mastiffs howling to be let indoors, etc. Within 24 hours another village 50 miles away would report sheep with their throats ripped out, residents menaced, burning eyes in the distance, muffled growls, etc.

> This was a highly mobile gang, expert at evading detection and leaving few or no clues behind them other than ravaged livestock, emotionally disturbed residents and the odd rivet from their leather riding jackets.
> But I must say that I am now having some doubts about all this. I notice that it is at least six months since the last Royal scandal and/or UFO sighting and no more QC's have been seen running naked and wigless from premises in Bendigo's red light district. In such circumstances, Old Bofors should have turned up much more frequently. Perhaps he is dead after all.

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When we move away from the animal kingdom to the much more general area of 'paranormal happenings' the situation is somewhat more complex. In Australia, at any rate, paranormal events seem to be on the wane. It is decades since I've read of a flying saucer abduction or of crop circles. However, judging by the volume of overseas material on the internet, I would say that paranormal happenings are in quite a healthy state in many countries. Sadly, one of the victims of the situation in Australia is the Min Min light. You rarely hear of it these days, even though its credentials are far better than those of the panthers. To make matters worse, the boffins now think they have explained the phenomenon and this will mean that another venerable Australian legend, dating back to pre-European settlement, will become a mere fact and lose all its intrigue. The people up Boulia way in central Queensland will be hit the hardest. Not long ago, they set up a multimedia experience, "The Min Min Encounter", at considerable expense. This "recreates the stories told by the people of the outback with animatronic mannequins and the latest in digital multimedia. The experience features a 10 metre rotating theatre, where the audience is given their very own (and very convincing!) Min Min lights experience".

Some time ago now, Professor Jack Pettigrew from the University of Queensland provided an optical explanation and data about Min Min lights in the journal of the Optometrists Association of Australia. It's all down to refraction of light (vehicle headlights usually) from layers of air at different temperatures. "A cold, dense layer of air next to the ground carries light far over the horizon to a distant observer without the usual dissipation and radiation, to produce a vivid mirage that baffles and enchants because of its unfamiliar optical properties". According to Pettigrew, who has reproduced the phenomenon using car headlights and observers at some distance, the unusual terrain of the Channel Country "makes the favourable atmospheric conditions more likely, while its isolation increase the impact of a single light source since the observer knows that it cannot be produced locally but sees it apparently there in front".

I have to say that, as a result of this, I have lost interest in the Min Min lights. I used to enjoy listening to old timers recount their own experience of the lights and offer their own explanation (I knew people from the outback who had seen it). The explanation I liked most had the phenomenon down to owls! This has been investigated to some extent, and it's not as silly as you might think. Many years ago an article on this subject appeared in a journal called *Australian Raptor Studies*. Apparently, there have been many overseas reports—how reliable I know not—of luminosity in Barn Owls, the cause of which is unknown. A common theory is that the owls roost in tree hollows where luminous bacteria or fungi grow. The birds are (supposedly) accidentally contaminated with this material and hence 'glow' at night. There are those old timers who swear that the birds do this deliberately to attract insects. It's a nice theory, but I'm afraid that Professor Pettigrew has blown it apart. Or has he? If it's all down to the refraction of man-made lights (as he supposes) how come the sightings date back to well before the time of the motor car and the electric light? It's difficult to believe that kero lamps or candles could produce light of a sufficient intensity. Despite this, Pettigrew's explanation seems to be pretty generally accepted. I note that even *Pravda* ran the story, so it must be true!

I think that we have probably not heard the end of this matter, nor of flying saucers, crop circles, giant cats, and alien abductions. Which is probably just as well. Try to imagine yourself as a media reporter faced with the task of producing interesting copy each day! In times of peace, economic prosperity, and relative social calm, what the hell do you write about! There comes a time when even the factional blues in the Labour Party die down for a time and the younger Royals take a break from their scandal-making activities. It's then that the cryptids come in handy.

MR DETHRIDGE AND THE PLASTICINE PEOPLE[28]

Some Reflections on Modern Business Managers

In the small township of Nathalia in Victoria's northern irrigation area there is a rather unusual monument. It is a water-metering device known as the Dethridge Wheel. A similar monument can be found in Griffith in New South Wales. For anyone who has travelled through the irrigation districts of south-eastern Australia, such wheels are a common sight. Every farm has such a meter on its channel outlet. In fact, these meters are used overseas as well, in places like Israel and the USA. The meter wheel was invented in Victoria by John Stewart Dethridge in 1910. Dethridge was an engineer who, in 1911, was appointed Commissioner of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission in Victoria. For the next fifteen years he ably carried out his role, both as an administrator and a 'hands on' engineer. He was, for instance, involved in the design and construction of the original Eildon Reservoir on the Goulburn River in Victoria.

I have drawn attention to Dethridge because I take him to be typical of what might term 'old-fashioned' managers. These were the people who occupied senior administrative positions, both government and non-government, in an earlier Australia. For the most part, they all shared one thing in common—a good working knowledge of that which they were appointed to manage. Indeed, very often they had worked their way up through the promotional ladder within the particular Department or industry to which they belonged. And the word *belonged* is important, for these people really did have some sense of vocation, in the truest sense—a lifetime's calling to a particular trade or occupation.

We need now to contrast this type of manager with the modern manager of a large corporation or government agency. These people rarely have any long-term association with the particular activity being managed. Indeed, they will usually have no specific training in that area at all. What they have instead is something called 'managerial skill' and such skill operates quite independent of the actual processes of output. In short, the typical modern manager can manage anything because the process of management is seen as being a wholly overarching skill which bears no relationship to the technical knowledge of production. Managers, then, function in much the same way as do catalysts in a chemical reaction. That is to say, they facilitate certain events without themselves being involved in any intimate way. Catalysts though, have a degree of specificity whereas managers do

[28]A much altered version of this essay appeared in Quadrant, Nov, 2006. In this present version I acknowledge the input of my friend and mentor, the late Roger Sworder..

not. We may rather liken these modern managers to 'plasticine people'—they can be moulded to fit any shape or size. In Aristotelian terms they are pure potentiality.

Some History

The natural habitat, as it were, of modern business managers is the industrial corporation although in more recent times, they have successfully invaded and permanently colonized new habitats such as government and semi-government departments and universities. In giving us a brief history of the modern corporation, Gideon Haigh (*Bad Company*, Quarterly Essay, Issue 10, 2003) suggests that its birth and subsequent growth was a consequence of three important developments—double-entry bookkeeping, the joint-stock company, and the legal idea of limited liability. These developments themselves predated the modern corporation, sometimes by centuries, but they provided the necessary foundations. Thus, double entry book-keeping is usually dated from 1494 when the Franciscan monk, Luca Pacioli, produced his treatise on this subject. You may well wonder, as I do, what St. Francis of Assisi would have made of this. Well before Pacioli though, careful recording of business transactions was common, and usury had almost become a virtue. In an interesting history of the rise of quantification in Western society, A.W. Crosby (*The Measure of Reality.* Cambridge Univ. Press 1997), gives a telling example from 1394—a hundred years before Pacioli. Francesco di Marco Datini, a merchant of Prato at that time, was in the habit of beginning his ledgers with the inscription 'In the name of God and of profit'.

The joint stock company likewise had its beginnings centuries ago—early examples date from the sixteenth century. But, as Gideon Haigh reminds us, the most important development, and the most recent, was the concept of limited liability:

> Before limited liability, a person who had invested … risked their whole worth: debtors' prisons were full of inadvertent and honorable failures. Few outside the founders [of a firm] and their kin would buy shares unless they either knew the firm's principals personally or could otherwise monitor its doings. Under limited liability – first permitted on restricted bases in the early nineteenth century, and finally made available to all companies by the legislature of New Jersey in 1846 – stockholders could not be held liable for the corporation's misdeeds.

For the modern manager, limited liability translates as 'all care, no responsibility'.

What is the Nature of Modern Management Practice?[29]

The crucial element is scale. When an organization becomes so big that those who manage it do so full time without taking real part in the actual function of the organization, then a problem arises. The problem is that the highest success possible for anyone in the organization, to be the head of it, no longer entails engagement in its work: the proper work of an organization is no longer the path to its highest honours. This has long been true of government ministers who shift between ministries with an embarrassing technical incompetence, but it is now true of larger and larger numbers of bureaucrats who have no place in the place where they work since they take no real part in its work. They should most properly be with the ministers whom they resemble in the centres of government. At least then they would be out of sight. Their presence in hospital, engineering plant, or on campus, suggests to the weaker minded that the highest success has nothing really to do with their present labours.

It is a dreadful message that the existence of these managers sends. As much as any working life and much more than most today, a profession is still a vocation, a kind of ideal life of service and science, than which there can be nothing better for those truly fitted to it. And everywhere we are confronted by doctors, engineers and scholars who have given away that life to manage those who do lead it. These apostates are the people chosen to manage the faithful and maintain the organisation's highest ideals. Plato was right about this, that a philosopher would only rule under duress because philosophers have something much better to do. It is only someone with something much better to do than rule who is fit to rule, because only such a person really knows what life's worth living for. But by that very knowledge of what life's worth living for, a person will be most reluctant to give the worthwhile life away, however great the service to be rendered by doing so. So, reluctance to lead is a signal quality of the good leader in most useful enterprises. This should be understood and written into the conditions of employment of such roles, as that they be of the shortest duration consistent with effective administration etc. We should think of managers more as the ancient Mexicans thought about miners underground: harmful but necessary work to be performed by the whole population on a strict rotation so that no-one ever does it for more than six months. It would be best if management were as nearly anonymous as possible and regarded as slightly shameful so that no-one got the idea that they were going to become famous by becoming the chief. The sanctions against a duly nominated and appointed official who did not do the work would need to be very severe, and there should be no rewards, privileges or perks whatever. In fact, it would be a good idea to institute a salary cut for those seconded to management in order to emphasise the deeply

[29] The following five paragraphs were contributed by the late Roger Sworder

inferior nature of the work. The most powerful argument is that it is really very bad for the managers themselves to be leading their lives, and this is the more true the more satisfied they are by their status. From this point of view the relatively humble title of vice-chancellor has virtue.

The appropriate size of an organization of professionals should be determined by this: that it can be managed part-time by one person or by a rotation of managers. If it larger than this, it is inefficient. Organisations should not harm their agents, least of all their managers, by perverting their vocations on a permanent basis. Quite large organizations of professionals can be run safely, notably the Oxbridge Colleges and the Inns of Court. We are a long way from these models of organization now.

How has this happened? Not by the actions of the apostates described above who merely appear when the time is ripe. It is because big business has taken over the professions, or at least because the so-called leaders of these professions think so. Here the word 'business' gives the game away. It is the disguise of those who really do nothing, the self-appropriated title of that enormous, vapid superstructure on our particular pot of beer. This superstructure may be as hyperactive as you like, but it is never busy in the same way that from a vocational point of view a manager can never be busy. What is the solution to this invasion of the real professions by the unreal world of business? It is to let the managers go. They have already lifted so far off the surface of the work which they administer that they hardly exist for their workers. Their attempts to reproduce normal working conditions by laughable questionnaires and mechanical assessments is a small price to pay for the almost complete absence of these awful people. They have disappeared up themselves most gratifyingly and they're happy too! That is the short term; in the long term the professions need to assert themselves.

We must understand the bureaucratic churning for what it is. We have now reached a stage of permanent revolution where there is no longer time to implement one raft of reforms before the next and contradictory set is upon us. The most highly paid members of institutions spend their time organizing for change which is never implemented. Everywhere we see the substitution of perfectly successful practices by centralized interference and strictly unbelievable quantities of new paperwork. Promotion carrying a few hundred dollars requires a fifty-page submission. This is the sting of the drones who do no real work themselves and interfere with those who do. But the damage they do others is miniscule compared to the damage they do themselves, whatever their status and pay. It is a bad, bad thing to mess with the ideals of a noble profession; it is a terrible thing to do it as a professional.

The Claims of the Modern Manager

In *After Virtue* (Duckworth, 1981), Alasdair MacIntyre devotes a good deal of attention to the modern business manager as a sort of *type species* of modernity and he questions the claim of effectiveness that is implied in the term 'management expertise'. It is important to note that MacIntyre is here referring to *general* management expertise and not to *technical* managers:

> With the manager, that dominant figure of the contemporary scene …. we have to place the peculiarly managerial fiction embodied in the claim to possess systematic effectiveness in controlling certain aspects of social reality. …. (This) concept of effectiveness as it is embodied in the utterances and practices of managerial roles and character is of course an extremely general concept; it is bound up with equally general notions of social control exercised downwards in corporations, government agencies, trade unions and a variety of other bodies.

MacIntyre goes on to note that there is a crucial gap between this generalized conception and any actual criteria which are precise enough to be useable in given situations. Long-range goals cannot be used for calculating such efficiency because the range of unforeseen variables increases with time. Likewise short-term goals are of little help because they not only change rapidly but can also be manipulated to show whatever one wishes them to show. The recent history of failure in several large corporations bears this latter point out. How was it, for instance, that HIH[30] could maintain the pretense of health when it was terminally ill for such a long time period?

In a sense then, the concept of the manager is not unlike the concept of the *universal* versus the *individual* which so occupied the early Schoolmen. In their attempt to define just what 'treeness' or 'chairness' was, the Schoolmen began by stripping away all attributes that were characteristic of the individual and hoped that they might be left with that which was common to all members of a genus. Alas, they were left with nothing! In the same way, if one takes from the concept of 'manager' such things as technical expertise (that belongs to the technical manager), accountancy skill (that belongs to the Company accountants), marketing skills, etc., then we might well ask what particular expertise is left—what is this 'management skill'? It turns out that only one thing is left and that is the ability of the managers to manipulate those below them in the bureaucratic structure. This is why they are plasticene people and can manage anything from a lolly factory to a large zoo. And so, MacIntyre supposes that, contrary to popular belief, managers are not 'morally neutral characters whose skills enable them to

30 HIH Insurance was Australia's second-largest insurance company before it was placed into provisional liquidation on 15 March 2001. The demise of HIH is considered to be the largest corporate collapse in Australia's history, with liquidators estimating that HIH's losses totalled up to A$5.3 billion.

devise the most efficient means of achieving whatever end is proposed'. Rather, he suggests that the whole concept of effectiveness is inseparable 'from a mode of human existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour.

But even here, MacIntyre supposes, another form of deception is at work. The supposed social control exerted by the manager is but a moral fiction, a masquerade. The term 'managerial effectiveness' presupposes knowledge claims which cannot be made good. It is precisely at this point that MacIntyre invites us to see the whole business in terms of emotive theory:

> … belief in managerial effectiveness parallels to some degree the thesis advanced by certain emotivist moral philosophers – Carnap and Ayer – about belief in God. Carnap and Ayer both extended the emotive theory beyond the realm of moral judgement and argued that metaphysical assertions more generally and religious assertions more particularly … do no more than express the feelings and attitudes of those who utter them.… I am suggesting that 'managerial effectiveness' functions much as Carnap and Ayer supposed 'God' to function.

Now, it may be true that logical positivism has been discarded as a current philosophical idea (A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* is now little more than a curiosity) but our liberal culture still takes morality to assert feelings and opinions. Witness the importance of the modern opinion poll in formulating policies, etc. And so, MacIntyre's reference to emotive theory seems a valid way of expressing the concept of 'managerial expertise'.

The knowledge claims of the modern manager, then, may well be a fiction. This would have an important consequence for those in our society who see 'big business' as exerting some sort of global hegemony. MacIntyre puts it this way:

> Consider the following possibility: that what we are oppressed by is not power but impotence; that one key reason why the presidents of large corporations do not, as some radical critics believe, control the United States is that they do not even succeed in controlling their own corporations; that all too often, when imputed organizational skill and power are deployed … (they) produce effects unsystematically and too often only coincidently related to the effects of which their users boast.

The main reason why the managers do not control their own large corporations was long ago pointed out by Isaiah Berlin (*Conversations with Henry Brandon*):

> One of the paradoxical consequences is therefore the dependence of a large number of human beings upon a collection of ill coordinated experts, each of whom …(is) unable to step out of his box and survey the relationship of his particular activity to the whole … Their responsibility increases in direct ratio to their ignorance of an ever-expanding field.

For MacIntyre, what is at stake here finally is the question of means and ends in the modern consumer society. His whole thesis revolves around what he sees as the destruction of the traditional Aristotelian concept of the moral order. In this tradition, MacIntyre supposes, 'there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature'. In other words, the traditional concept is a teleological one and the means-ends relationships involved in human work require a practice where the goods are internal to themselves— 'man-as-he could-be'. Modern work is, of course, generally not of this kind. MacIntyre puts it thus:

> One of the key moments in the creation of modernity occurs when production moves outside the household. So long as productive work occurs within the structure of households, it is easy and right to understand that work as part of the sustaining of the community of the household and of those wider forms of community which the household in turn sustains. As, and to the extent that, work moves outside the household and is put to the service of impersonal capital, the realm of work tends to become separated from everything but the service of biological survival and the reproduction of the labor force, on the one hand, and that of institutionalized acquisitiveness on the other. … The means-end relationships …. Are necessarily external to the goods which those who work seek… .

It is within this sort of environment that the modern business manager has evolved as a distinct species.

Change and 'Progress' in Modern Management Practices

One of the most obvious attributes of the modern consumer society is the ever-increasing rate of change. It is precisely in dealing with this change that the modern business manager/consultant makes certain claims to specialist expertise. How many readers of this essay have listened to some highly paid (and usually imported) business expert tell them that they must learn to embrace change, that change is inevitable, that change is good and leads to progress and improvement. Upon what empirical data are these assertions made? Is it true, for instance, that radical reorganization of major organizations every few months (a reality now in many government departments in Australia) leads to increased efficiency and better staff morale?

Change is portrayed as some vast impersonal and irresistible force against which resistance is useless, nay, counter productive. Are we, then, not in control of our own destinies even to the limited extent of providing some modicum of stability to human affairs and human existence? We are told, of course, that new technology is driving the change. But the providers of the new technology will then tell you that their new machines and processes are simply a response to rapid change in the world! There is an interminable circularity at work here.

The linking of change with the notion of progress is also a feature of modernity. We convince ourselves that, in some generalized way, change brings about progress. It is unclear why such a linkage should be made although a certain naïve approach to Darwinian evolutionary theory may help to explain the link. Many people mistakenly suppose that evolution is always in a forward direction. They see programs on the television which chart the gradual development of humans from some stooping, hairy ape to a modern human in a business suit. Dinosaurs, of course, would give us a quite different view if we were in a position to travel back in time and communicate with them. Again, the very notion of *progress* is itself problematical. Exactly what does it mean for humans—electrically heated toilet seats, spa baths in every home, cloned babies? We are forced to conclude in the final analysis that it relates to *eudaimonia*—a state of wellbeing or happiness. Do we have more of it today than Aristotle had in that remote past of ancient Greece?

The Perfect Organizational Structure—The Quest for the Holy Grail

There came into prominence in the 1980s, perhaps even earlier, a general notion that the key to business efficiency was to be found somehow or other in the particular hierarchical structure of an organisation. If one could get the structure right, all former problems would be solved. Thus began the great quest for the perfect Platonic structure. Business experts and facilitators (another modern type) were hired to find this Holy Grail. Senior staff members were then dragooned into attending meetings where huge volumes of butcher's paper were disfigured with spirit-pen drawings of possible staff structures and lines of authority. Later, there came the insidious PowerPoint Presentation. Brain-storming was the order of the day. Staff generally left these meetings in a benumbed state. Gradually, a resistance movement evolved and one commonly saw the following quotation (falsely attributed to Petronius Arbiter as far as I am aware) pasted up on doors and staff-room notice boards:

> We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.

Even if Petronius was not the author of this quote, it nonetheless has a ring of truth. It is worth recalling that the giant American Company, Enron had no less than six major re-organisations in its last 18 months before its spectacular crash.

It is important here to hark back to MacIntyre's thesis concerning the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour. This, perhaps, is the real agenda involved in the quest for the perfect staff structure.

Telos and the Mission Statement

Part of the masquerade associated with modern management is the production of mission statements. One can understand the need, in certain types of large corporation or department, for an occasional reminder to staff of the purpose of the organization and of its duties to clients. But this in no way explains the pernicious plague of mission statements which has spread like some debilitating disease throughout almost *all* organizations, business and otherwise. You will find such statements, for instance, hanging in frames in the narthex of churches. When an organization founded upon divine revelation needs a mission statement, something is seriously awry. In the old days, church mission statements came from Africa and usually said "send more missionaries". Why this sudden need for an organization, any organization, to state the reason for its existence? If its existence is *that* problematical, perhaps it deserves to be wound up.

Again, the answer might again be sought by reference to MacIntyre's general thesis. When the traditional understanding of means and ends is lost (i.e., externalized), some substitute is needed. We need to convince ourselves of a *purpose*—a *telos*—in a world awash with subjectivism. When my *purpose* may not be your *purpose*, some sort of HCF is needed. The mission statement then becomes a sort of manipulative tool to be used by the manager to achieve some supposed improvement in 'service delivery'.

As an aside, it is worth pointing out here that those for whom the mission statement in intended, either as customers or as suppliers of the goods/services, are almost always identified as *stakeholders*. The impersonal nature of this designation again reinforces Macintyre's thesis. For exactly the same reason, we have the modern term *human resource management.* This is precisely the language needed in an age when the wholly human has been supplanted by the human-as-machine.

Lateralism, Multi-skilling, and Other Fairy Stories

Another enormously destructive fiction promulgated by the modern business manager is the peculiar slant given to the notion of 'staff development'. It is supposed that maximum efficiency can be married to personal goals of individual workers by an increased fluidity in job opportunities. To achieve this, the old concept of promotion via experience *within* a section of the organization has been replaced by dissolving traditional occupational boundaries so that staff can move laterally anywhere within the organization. Indeed, in the case of government departments, the whole of the state or commonwealth public service is a happy hunting ground and staff can flit from job to job like butterflies in some huge botanical garden. In order for this to work, the concept of multi-skilling has arisen, so that an individual staff member is supposedly fitted out to take on a

huge range of specialist activities. They are like those cheap Swiss Army Knives—having a multiplicity of functions none of which are performed very well. Does any of this give real job satisfaction or is it rather the case that boredom is kept at bay by the medium of novelty?

The immediate result of this move has been an enormous increase in staff turnover. In some areas, staff remain barely long enough to 'learn the ropes' before moving on to some bigger and better opportunity elsewhere. A good deal of time and resources is then required to train the new replacements before they, in their turn, leave for greener fields. This problem is particularly serious in those areas of work where 'local knowledge' is important, or where long-term involvement in the local community is an essential part of the work. The general area of natural resource management immediately comes to mind. Here, it may take some newcomer to a job many years to learn the local physical and social environment—the main management issues (pests, diseases, erosion problems, farming techniques, etc.) and the main concerns and aspirations of the local human inhabitants.

What has been lost by abandoning the old system is the propagation of knowledge from 'old hands' to young apprentices. And nothing can substitute for this. The upshot is that wheels are constantly re-invented and fruitless paths constantly re-taken. Moreover, clients quickly lose faith in any organization which is in such constant upheaval.

Business Management and the Universities

We might begin by recalling the traditional notion of a university education as enunciated by John Henry Newman:

> If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world. It neither confines its views to particular professions on one hand, nor creates heroes or inspires genius on the other. Works indeed of genius fall under no art; heroic minds come under no rule; a University is not a birthplace of poets or of immortal authors, of founders of schools, leaders of colonies, or conquerors of nations. It does not promise a generation of Aristotles or Newtons, of Napoleons or Washingtons, of Raphaels or Shakespeares, though such miracles it has before now contained within its precincts. Nor is it content on the other hand with forming the critic or the experimentalist, the economist or the engineer, although such too it includes within its scope. But a university training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power,

> and refining the intercourse of private opinions and judgements, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them. (*The Idea of a University, 1852).*

Against such an idea, it is instructive to look at the composition of a typical business studies course at any modern university. There is a heavy emphasis on human behavioural science and when one looks at course components in more detail, MacIntyre's thesis of manipulation looms large. Here, for instance is a university handbook description of a subject called 'Organisational Behaviour':

> Organisational behaviour aims at understanding and managing people at work in order to improve an organisation's effectiveness. It is a multi-disciplinary examination of what people do in organisations and has four levels of analysis: Individual, group, organisation and culture. This subject explores all four levels of analysis and emphasises the psychological aspects of organisational behaviour

And here is another called 'Consumer Behaviour'':

> This subject provides an understanding of the role of consumer behaviour in development of the total marketing mix. The contribution of psychological and social knowledge relevant to both consumer and organisational marketing is evaluated, with an emphasis on practical skills of analysis and the writing of effective positioning statements.

It is true that subjects dealing with business ethics are taught in these courses, but they do not generally question those particular modes of behaviour which MacIntyre discusses. In other words, they take for granted the premise that subtle manipulation of other human beings for the purposes of business success is a normal and proper part of business. They may well preach against fraud, political manipulation, and so on, but a vast area of more subtle manipulative behaviour is left untouched.

Conclusion

What can be done about this? Not much probably. The nexus between modern liberalism and free-market capitalism severely limits our ability to address the shortcomings of modern management without drastic change We are slaves to that which we have built with our own hands. MacIntyre believes that liberal capitalism cannot, by its very nature, prevent the de-humanising of the traditional concept of human work:

> The tradition of the virtues is at variance with central features of the modern economic order and more especially, its individualism, its acquisitiveness and its elevation of the values of the market to the central social place.

But there are some signs of hope on the horizon. A number of younger academics, most of them writing from a Christian perspective, have now banded together to form a movement which they call 'postliberalism'. Liberalism, they claim, is now dying a long, slow death, having failed to deliver on its promises.

They propose a radical re-think of what it means to be a human person. It is significant that nearly all of them have gone back to Plato and Aristotle in their search for a more just human society. We might say of these new crusaders that they are both post-liberal and pre-conservative at the same time. For it is obviously the case that their conservatism long predates that of Edmund Burke and his post-Enlightenment followers.

Until recently, it was usual to judge the performance of the liberal-capital model by contrasting it with its hideous totalitarian alternatives. But the Berlin wall fell a very long time ago and such arguments no longer hold a great deal of force. Indeed, the successful mix of Marxism and capitalism practiced in modern China puts paid to any suggestion that free market capitalism automatically promotes human freedom. Quite the contrary in some cases.

As one of the more prominent writers of the new postliberal movement, D.C. Schindler tells us, what liberalism gave us was a "freedom from reality" (the title of his 2017 book). It is now time to walk out of Plato's cave and into the real world where each person is an end in herself or himself, not the means to the end of some business manager.

PURE FINDERS AND THE BROAD-TOOTHED RAT

I need to begin this little treatise with some rather dull etymological material of a slightly offensive nature but take heart, for things will improve. The naming of the solid, metabolic by-products of higher animals has always caused us problems. In writings and conversation, we tend to step around them in much the same way as we do when we physically encounter a steaming pile on the nature strip or sidewalk. Doctors, for instance, like to refer to 'stools'. The derivation of this is not immediately apparent, but I have been rewarded by a little research. In the days of old, it seems, a windowsill was commonly called a stool—a place where you might sit. And indeed, they did "go to stool", and for the very reason that you now suspect. We are talking here of some considerable elevation from ground level so that our next descriptive term, 'droppings', follows fairly logically. 'Droppings', though, is a term which seems to be reserved for non-human animals. It is widely used by middle-aged ladies with poodles or old men with racing pigeons (the young-uns simply use a crude, four-letter swear-word). 'Droppings' is an entirely unsuitable word, describing as it does the plural of any substance or thing acted upon by gravity. Far greater specificity is required.

Scientists are much more accurate, yet suitably decorous and sterile. They use the term 'faeces' or, more pompously, 'excreta' (is there an 'excretum' or do they go about in bands?). Now the word 'faece's comes from the Latin *faex* = dregs, and excreta from *ex* + *cernere* = sift out. From "faeces", I presume , comes the verb 'defecate'. As far as I can ascertain, the only lexicographer to accurately define usage of 'defecate' from these Latin roots was Dr Johnson. His primary definition is "To purge liquors from lees or foulness; to purify; to cleanse". 'Excrement' is a much harsher word and has a certain whiff of unpleasantness. You might have reasoned that it would be the opposite of increment, but things are never that easy with the English language. Economists are one of the few animal species which process increment to produce excrement. Contrariwise, the tabloid press and TV producers of the *Sex Life* oeuvre (see below), generate increment from excrement. American mammalogists often use the word 'scat' but again, the association with metabolic by-products is not at all clear. Mind you, knowing something about the American mind, it could be a reference to human reactions on actually finding the said product.

Keen gardeners simply use the catch-all word 'manure', and I must say that they are quite open in their praise of its qualities. The human variety used to be called 'nightsoil', and since many of my readers will remember the days before

widespread use of septic tanks or sewage reticulation, an explanation of this term is quite unnecessary. The term 'ordure' is rarely used these days but you will come across it from time to time in historical texts. Just the other day I was reading an account of the siege of Malta mounted by Suliman the Magnificent and it seems that victory for the forces of Christendom can be attributed in no small way to some early biological warfare employed by the Knights of Malta. Before retreating to the security of their massive fortifications, they fouled the outlying waterholes and wells with human 'ordure', thereby causing many an upset in Dervish stomachs. Saddam Hussein is now merely trying to even the score.

We seem to be getting progressively shyer about this business as time goes on. Which is all very interesting because it goes against the general trend and does not accord with the *Zeitgeist*. Today's deeply meaningful TV programs like *Sex Life* discuss matters which were once only whispered in bedrooms. But toilet habits? Not on your Nelly! It's not the done thing—a bit like starting or ending sentences with prepositions. It is something, up with which we will not put. Defecation and death are the two dirty words of our comprehensively liberated era. People were much more open, descriptive, and accurate in relation to these matters a few hundred years ago.

That great Scottish poet, Mr Robert Hendryson (circa 1500) delivered a marvellous example from his death bed and we are deeply indebted to Sir Francis Kynaston who recorded, largely without the excrescence of punctuation marks, the great man's last few hours and utterances:

> This Mr Robert Hendrysoun he was questionles a learned and witty man and it is pitty we have no more of his works, because being very old he dyed of a diarrhoea or fluxe, of whom there goes this merry, though somewhat unsavoury tale, that all physitians having given him over and he lying drawing his last breath there came an old woman unto him, who was held a witch, and asked him whether he would be cured, to whom he sayed very willingly, then quod she there is a whikey tree in the lower end of your orchard, and if you will go and walk but thrice about it, and thrice repeat theis wordes whikey tree whikey tree take away this fluxe from me you shall be presently cured, he told her that beside he was extreme faint and weake it was extreme frost and snow and that it was impossible for him to go; she told him that unles he did so it was impossible he should recover. Mr Hendrysoun then lifting up himselfe, and pointing to an oaken table that was in the roome, asked her and said gude dame I pray ye tell me, if it would not do as well if I repeated thrice theis words oken burd oken burd garre me shit a hard turde. The woman seeing herself derided and scorned ran out of the house in a great passion and Mr Henrysoun within a halfe a quarter of an houre departed this life.

Mind you, there are notable exceptions to this rule of modern squeamishness and I recall with some pride that we faced the problem squarely when I was an undergraduate at Newman College, Melbourne. The business of keeping a check on the practical aspects of voiding by-products was squarely in the bailiwick of the Defecation and Urination Committee (usually shortened to D & U Committee). Members were 'elected' to this Committee in a rather undemocratic fashion by the Senior Gentlemen of the College. 'Elected' delegates nearly always came from the ranks of the Freshmen and they were carefully chosen to ensure that the more bookish intellectuals were given an opportunity to handle some of the mundane but nonetheless essential aspects of college life. If you pronounced the English language correctly, could quote at length from Dante or Homer, and did not possess a jock strap smelling of rubbing oil, then you were almost certain to be 'elected' to the D & U Committee. If, in addition to this, your father was a High Court judge or a politician, 'election' was absolutely certain. It was a sort of social and academic levelling device.

In my days at Newman, the D & U Committee was ably headed by a man who has since ascended to even greater heights and is today of some literary eminence. His modesty is such that I feel obliged to preserve his anonymity (no, it wasn't Jack Hibberd). This same gentleman was, in some ways, well before his time. He once proposed a motion at our College AGM—"That Newman College disassociate itself from the Catholic Church". It was defeated. He took the D & U job seriously. I recall a nasty incident at one stage, when a large faecal mass obstinately refused to flush from the toilet pan and floated around like some giant ocean leviathan basking in a shallow ocean or a sinister iceberg of the Titanic *oeuvre*. The perpetrator—perhaps eliminator is the better word—was never discovered despite intensive investigations. A large notice was hastily prepared and placed on the student notice board: "Warning—A turd of noble proportions and heroic obstinancy is currently infesting the D Flats dike. Please make other arrangements". Or very similar words to that effect—I write from memory only. This was a frank, accurate and altogether masterly literary handling of the situation and it is little wonder that the writer is now something of an *éminence grise* in the literary world.

The D & U Committee has, no doubt, long since gone the way of most time-honoured University traditions in this cursed microchip, cost-benefit age. Your modern uni student Sir, is simply a sort of biological CD-ROM to be crammed with the requisite megabytes of knowledge, and given the numbered and pre-printed 'hard copy' degree. No time for this silly behaviour. Why, I can remember the day that we had to console The Strapper with soft words and hard

liquor after he gained a mark of 57% in Chemistry. He had suddenly realised that valuable drinking time had been lost in the pursuit of superfluous knowledge—a full 7% of wasted effort.

But the old Newman men of my day were something of an aberration in relation to this excretion business. As I said earlier, you need to go back a couple of hundred years to find a people who were prepared to call a turd a turd. But that much earlier people called dog droppings (if you will forgive my use of that term) something entirely different. Not "barker's eggs" as we used to as kids, but "pures". The etymology of this marvellous and entirely apt word may not be apparent to the casual reader and your Funk & Wagnalls may not help, so I need to explain.

Long ago, after the Fall of Rome but before the Whitlam Dismissal, dog turds (let us not quibble about this business any longer) were used in the process of preparing leather from animal hides. After the fellmonger (that one will be in your Funk & Wagnalls) had prepared the hides, they were steeped in a rich soup of dog turds. By some miracle of nature, it seems that dog turds contain particular complex chemicals which 'purify' and tan the hide. They're probably the same chemicals that form the special ingredients in those hair shampoos you see advertised on TV. You know—the ones which give lustre and bounce. There again, it might be aloe vera. Anyway, I digress. The use of dog turds for tanning is not as ancient as you might think. Until fairly recent times, the very best Moroccan leather was prepared in this way. Indeed, it is one reason why those Moroccan people employed in the trade had such a high incidence of hydatid disease. But I digress again. Now as you can imagine, leather was a very important item of trade two hundred years ago, and large quantities were produced. This, in turn, called for very large quantities of 'pures' or dog turds. Here is where the Pure Finders came in.

In the early days of Pure Finders (I refer here solely to the industry in London—other cities and countries may have differed in their work practice agreements), the trade was apparently dominated by women. They were called bunters and their pure finding was really only a sideline—they mainly collected rags and bones. The dog turds were picked up off the London streets and sold by the basket to the fellmongers. I have read somewhere that even this trade had its shysters and slick operators *a la* Christopher Skase, and a substitution racket flourished. Lime and sand were sometimes cunningly formed to give all the outward appearances of the real McCoy. History does not record exactly when this trade ceased, or why. There have been many theories. I sometimes imagine that a terrible disease epizootic (you only use 'epidemic' if people are the victims)

swept through the dog population of London, causing violent diarrhoea. Of course, it might have been an early swing towards global trading and a full free market economy which finished it off. You can just imagine some of today's Common Market countries dumping their produce in this manner.

All of this has been a rather long-winded introduction to my main theme which has to do with my own pure-finding work, here in Australia. You would be entirely wrong to suppose that dog turds are no longer collected in this plastic, hygienic, zip-top age. They are avidly sought after by a small band of enthusiasts and I have been enormously privileged to be counted as one of them. When I speak here of 'dog' turds please understand that I am using a broad term to cover several species. We took little interest in your town-bred mutts and confined our attentions to wild Canidae—foxes, feral dogs, dingoes, *et hoc genus omne*. There were two lines of inquiry. The first had to do with the eating habits of the animals, and the second with their helminthifauna (forget the Funk & Wagnalls on this one—I will explain later).

These wild canids are by nature rather shy, nocturnal (no, no, they are crepuscular), and highly cursorial animals. If you wish to study their food habits, you can forget the idea of direct observation. You could of course, kill the animals and look at the contents of their gut. Indeed, we did a bit of this but Peter Singer's crowd frowned upon this as being an 'intrusive' technique (this is a marvellous Newspeak word indicating that your research technique requires that you murder the animal under study). So it was that we decided to collect the turds of these animals instead and to examine them most carefully in an effort to discover what that faecal mass started out as when it began its journey at the other end of the gastrointestinal tract.

To do this, we studied the hairs, teeth and small bone fragments which are able to resist the digestive processes and pass through the gut relatively unscathed by enzymatic attack. My learned colleague and old friend, Hans Brunner, produced a photographic key for the identification of mammalian hairs and we later published this as a book. The microscopic structure of hairs from most indigenous and introduced mammals was carefully recorded, and the material from the turds then compared against this to ascertain what species had been ingested by our carnivorous predator. Procuring the reference material was not always easy because some of our native species are quite rare. I recall a number of trips to the Melbourne Museum, ostensibly to have a chat with the Curator of Mammals, Joan Dixon, where Hans deftly removed a few body hairs from *Bettongia penicilliata* or *Thylacinus cyanocephalus*, with the aid of a hitherto well-concealed razor blade. Meanwhile I distracted Joan in polite conversation.

But the most enjoyable work was in collecting the turds. We spent many a happy day wandering along the tourist paths in Ferntree Gully National Park and other idyllic places, carefully collecting the turds. After a while, you could predict the richer turd-bearing country. Foxes and wild dogs like to mark out their territories with excretions and they usually choose prominent positions along tracks, small raised hillocks or solitary clumps of high grass. We even had competitions as to who could collect the most turds in a given time and, I must say, Hans was a bad loser. But the Swiss are like that. Identification of the host animal was never really a problem. Your wild cats, for instance, tend to bury their turds, perhaps because they are more sensitive about the whole business. Foxes produce a characteristically pointed turd which is aerodynamically superior to the blunter dog turds. It's like comparing an F1-11 fighter to the Hindenberg Airship.

In the course of all this work, we went to most of the more remote places in Victoria. They call such places wilderness now, but when I was a boy, the wilderness was the place that prophets and holy men went to, so as to remove themselves from the grossness of this world and to commune more freely with the inner self. Nowadays its full of young ecofreaks building minimum impact fires and thoroughly enjoying themselves. Anyway, I digress again. By the late 1970s, we had amassed a considerable treasury of turds and the results of their analyses were most instructive. Amongst the remains of the many native species turning up in the turds were little pieces of *Mastacomys fuscus*—the Broad-toothed Rat. Now this little animal is a native rat and, prior to our arrival on the scene, it had been supposed to be quite rare. Indeed, it was known to be extant in only one or two spots in Victoria. Suddenly, Hans began to turn it up from all over the place. We communicated our results to some colleagues down at the Fisheries and Wildlife Division. They were somewhat sceptical and suggested that Hans was probably a bit over-enthusiastic with his microscope. Brunner was indignant. He went back to the turds and carefully sifted through them again. This time he produced not only the hairs, but the entirely characteristic teeth as well (that is why they are called broad-toothed rats). Victory was ours.

There was a darker side to all this though. Once, while Hans was examining some turds from Sherbrooke Park, he came across human hairs. I suggested that they were probably the result of a fox visiting a garbage dump or raiding the eco-composter of a nearby colony of semi-feral Greenies. I mean, a lot of people cut their own hair or that of others and drop the sundered locks into the garbage. Being a typically methodical Swiss chap, Hans went back and re-examined the hairs. No, he said, these hairs were not cut, for he could see the root of the hair. We then decided it was time to ring the police. After the customary 'what's all

this then' introductions, they promised to look into the matter. A few weeks later, we learned of the discovery of the corpse of a suicide in the Park. Victory again for the Brunner technique and who would now say that collecting turds was a thoroughly idle endeavour? Some of you might think that I am being altogether too casual and glib about such an appalling business. This is not so. The circumstance of human remains being devoured by an animal is entirely natural and commonplace. We ought to recall those memorable lines from Dylan Thomas—"And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb/ How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm".

That last little reflection has prompted me to digress briefly once again, for the purpose of making a small prediction. Let me tell you in all seriousness, that the day is not far away when we shall hear news of Australia's first fully ecological interment. Here, the remains of The Loved One will be composted in some specially designated section of a National Park or Wilderness area, so that the nutrient cycle is replenished. There are people who feel strongly enough about carbon gas emissions to refuse cremation, and who will also baulk at the idea of being buried in a casket made of wood or wood products. They will further demand that they are composted with indigenous flowers and shrubs only. And, no, they will not allow Dynamic Lifter—they will all be practicing atheists and paid-up members of the Australian Sceptics Society.

Now at long last, to that word helminthifauna. Helminths are intestinal worms and they can be very nasty little beggars indeed. Everything has its place, as the Bible says, and a purpose for everything under heaven. And so it is that your gut, dear reader, and that of all animals, is the home for a vast range of fauna—microbes of every description and worms of the most bizarre type. The gut, in short, has its own fauna and the wormy denizens of this realm are referred to as helminthifauna. Every one of us has probably had worms at one stage or other, but we should not go shouting this about. They might decide to put a tax on it or, even worse, have a 'national helminth awareness day' with tiresome people on street corners rattling moneyboxes.

There are a couple of non-intrusive ways of studying these little blighters. You can collect turds, as we did, and look for the helminth eggs. Veterinary people (who have awarded themselves the title of Doctor these days—in my youth they were just glorified horse-plumbers) do this all the time. My own academic interest was in tapeworms—a particular class of helminths which the boffins call cestodes—and, in particular, those of foxes and dogs. Here the old turd collection technique has a few shortcomings, for most of the aforementioned beasts produce identical-looking eggs. More drastic measures are required. The standard way of

collecting these large worms (they can attain a metre or more) is by purging. In my younger days, this was done with a marvellously effective plant extract called "areca". It came from the areca nut. Indeed, there was a time when you could purchase these nuts and prepare your own doses. Many an older farmer will remember those days. The recipe called for a standard measure used at that time—"about as much of the ground-up product as you can fit on the point of a knife". This, of course, was before the days of the Bowie knife and other such broadswords, recently popularised in *Crocodile Dundee*.

The subject animal, usually a snarling cur chained up behind the chook shed, was approached cautiously and slipped a dose which was cunningly parcelled in butter or mutton fat. Then it was simply a matter of waiting. After ten minutes or so, vague intestinal rumblings could be heard, like the sound of distant thunder, or Don John of Austria, going to the War. This was a signal to unleash the hound. There followed an awkward time during which the subject desperately hunted out a suitable deposition site. It was usually a thicket of stinging nettles or rabbit thistles. After some circumambulation and final positioning, the entire contents of the gastro-intestinal tract would be voided with great force and often with disconcerting audible accompaniment. There, garnishing the steaming pile would be the tapeworms, white and glistening in all their pristine beauty.

Ah yes, they were the good old days. These days, it's probably all done with microchips or gene probes. And I'll bet we will not have long to wait before the government realises that an evacuation tax is much neater than a consumption tax and sets up its own D & U Committee. That will be intrusive. Such are the times.

PURITANISM AND THE ORIGINS OF MODERN SCIENCE IN THE WEST

In the history of the West, the quest to understand the universe around us has been pursued under the influence of either of two major alternative convictions concerning the relationship between knowledge and life. In one—that coming from the Platonic tradition—philosophic understanding is coextensive with the whole of human life and experience and is the proper end, the supreme accomplishment of life. In this tradition, as Socrates said, the unexamined life is not worth living. The other conviction or philosophic tradition supposes that life essentially transcends knowledge and that while philosophic understandings are very valuable, they are subordinate to the greater end of that practical knowledge which will either improve human life or, at least, make its hardships more bearable. These two convictions, which for simplicity might be termed 'humans are for philosophy' and 'philosophy is for humans', have continued on down through the ages, albeit in somewhat different garb.

The two views are not mutually exclusive and it is, rather, often a matter of emphasis. We too readily assume that the empiricist-scientific model has now rendered all other contenders as obsolete, but it, too, has its limitations. We have no warrant to assume that our modern version of things represents some end-point of knowledge or, indeed, that it provides the *only* conditions capable of sustaining a sophisticated and cultured society. It is salutary to recall that, in the civilization of ancient Greece which produced such prodigies of art, literature, and learning, important decisions were made by consulting the Oracle at Delphi, or by divination. In the Roman Empire too, Pliny tells us of the importance of the birds used for divination:

> These are the birds that give the *Most-Favourable Omens*; these birds daily control our officers of state, and shut or open to them their own homes; these send forward or hold back the Roman rods of office and order or forbid battle formation, being the auspices of all our victories won all over the world; these hold supreme empire over the empire of the world, being as acceptable to the gods with even their inward parts and vitals as are the costliest victims.[31]

Out of the ruins of the Greek and Roman Empire there gradually emerged the civilisation of Christian Europe with its particular understanding of the

[31] Pliny, *Natural History*. Transl. H. Rackham. 1938-63. Loeb Classical Library (Harvard Univ. Press). Book X. xxiv. p. 49.

universe around it. This system of understanding underwent many modifications, particularly in the 13th century when many of the works of Plato and Aristotle were finally recovered via the Arab world. The medieval system of understanding reached its climax in the works of St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 who, in a brilliant synthesis, managed to combine many of the elements of Greek philosophy with the Biblical understanding and the corpus of Christian works handed down from the early Church Fathers. This system, usually referred to as the scholastic philosophy, endured until the Reformation. Indeed, a significant part of the medieval understanding of the universe persisted until much later. By the end 17th Century, however, a huge change had taken place and there emerged what we now call 'the age of science'. It is of course, something of a misnomer because 'science' is a Greek word and had been in play for two millennia or more. The critical difference is in content. For the ancients, as for the medieval scholars, the supreme science was metaphysics—the science of the Real. For us, science is concerned chiefly with progress in the material universe. For them, it was predominantly a non-experimental and intellectual enterprise and, to use that lovely phrase attributed to Plotinus, it was 'no journey for the feet'.

This is not to suggest that the science of material things was entirely neglected during these earlier periods. Indeed, during the scholastic period and the rise of the universities there was an array of factors which combined to provide an amenable seed-bed for the new science which was to follow. The belief in a divinely created world order which was accessible to human reason legitimised scientific and scholarly research. Moreover, the ancient understanding of humans as imperfect beings and the Christian notion of the Fall introduced the idea of limitation of the human intellect and thus opened the way for intellectual criticism. It also provided justification for the scholarly values of modesty, reverence, and self-criticism. [32] For all that, though, scientific enquiry (as we know it) was not a major feature of the period. It would be truer to say that it laid the intellectual groundwork but not the clear motivation needed for such a major change. The pearl of great price was not some better understanding of this world, but of the conditions necessary to achieve life in the next.

Of course, great changes in our system of understanding are seldom abrupt and clear cut. There is usually what Sidney Webb once called 'the inevitability of gradualness'. The standard explanation from today's science popularisers is that the scientific age is somehow or other a product of the gradual secularisation of society such that real scientific progress advanced in proportion to the general retreat of religion. Only when men and women were 'liberated' from the shackles

32 This brief summary of the intellectual climate of the medieval universities comes from the massive *History of the University in Europe.* Vol 1. Universities in the Middle Ages. Ed. Hilde de Ridder-Symoens. Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992

of imposed religious doctrines and ideas, so the story goes, could they freely examine the world round them in what Hume was to call, much later, 'the calm sunshine of the mind'. But the change in outlook in the seventeenth century was rapid and nowhere more so than in England. What brought about this huge and relatively sudden change? The claim of increasing secularisation will simply not do as an explanatory principle since all the evidence suggests that the early promoters of the new science were, for the most part, pious believers.

During the 1930s, a young Harvard sociologist, Robert Merton, decided to investigate this matter in some detail and it became the substance of his PhD dissertation. He was prompted to do so by after reading Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this work, Weber had made passing reference to the possibility that the sorts of arguments he had advanced in respect of capitalism might also apply to the rise of modern science. Merton took up this idea and published his findings in 1938 under the title *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England*.[33] It was immediately controversial and caused a great deal of angst amongst his fellow sociologists—for reasons which I will discuss later.

As the title of Merton's work suggests, his scope went well beyond religion and the new science, and he was quick to point out that a whole range of influences, not just religion, was in play during this crucial period. Nonetheless, it was clear to Merton that many of the values held by the Puritans—an intramundane asceticism, faith in progress, and an empiricist outlook—were the very qualities that allowed the new science to flourish and he proposed that Puritanism was a *major* factor in its rise to prominence. To back up his thesis Merton trawled through a huge amount of written material from 17th century England and also consulted other scholars of his own time who were also interested in a possible connection. One of these, Dorothy Stimson, had carefully studied the composition of the newly formed Royal Society (1645). She found that, of 68 members for whom religious outlook was known, 42 were clearly Puritan.[34] Given that the Puritans comprised a relatively small minority in the general population, this finding is quite significant.

When Merton looks at the writings of prominent Puritans of this era, he finds a 'consistent scheme of orientation' which:

> … embraced an undisguised emphasis upon utility as well as control of self and the external world, which in turn involved a preference for the visual,

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33 Merton, R.K. *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England*. In this essay, I use the 1970 edition published by Humanities Press New Jersey. This later edition contains a useful preface where Merton answers some of his critics and provides a summary of important ideas.

34 Quoted by Merton, op.cit. pg 114

> manual and concretely manageable rather than the purely logical and verbal.[35]

This lines up precisely with the requirements of the new science, first outlined by Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* (1620). Bacon was heavily influenced by the Puritans as a young man and, although his allegiances shifted backwards and forwards over time (pro and anti-Puritanism), his writings stress Puritan values such as utility and practicality. His posthumous influence on the fledgling Royal Society is everywhere evident. Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* is full of praise for Bacon.[36] No-one has better summarised Bacon's general outlook and the profound changes that they involved than Lord Macaulay in his famous essay on Bacon:

> In the fifth century Christianity had conquered Paganism, and Paganism had infected Christianity. The Church was now corrupt. The rites of the Pantheon had passed into her worship, and the subtilties of the Academy into her creed ... The great work of improving the condition of the human race was still considered as unworthy of a man of learning ... At length the time arrived when the barren philosophy .... was destined to fall. Driven from its ancient haunts, it had taken sanctuary in that Church which it had persecuted .... Antiquity, prescription, the sound of great names, have ceased to awe mankind. The dynasty which had reigned for ages was at an end; and the vacant throne was left ... At this time Bacon appeared ... To make men perfect was no part of Bacon's plan. His humble aim was to make imperfect men comfortable ... The aim of the Platonic philosophy was to raise us far above vulgar wants. The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to supply our vulgar wants.[37]

One factor not discussed by Merton was the influence of magic and 'wise' men and women. In an age of frequent disease outbreaks, disastrous fires, and other factors contributing to human suffering, astrologers, soothsayers, alchemists and the like provided an alternative source of comfort and hope to the Puritan clergy. The latter, perceiving these practitioners of magic as a threat to their authority, saw the new science as a means to discredit them.[38] Moreover, the Puritans had a keen dislike of 'easy solutions', supposing that all benefits and comforts to mankind must be won by honest, hard work and not by magic and cunning. One suspects too, that such magic may well have been attributed to diabolic influences.

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35 Merton, pg 115

36 I have used the facsimile edition of Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*. Kessinger Publishing, 2003

37 http://www.scribd.com/doc/49640596/Francis-Bacon-Selections-With-Essays-by-Macaulay-and-S-A-Gardiner

38 Wegter-McNelly, K. 2001. *The Merton Thesis: The Influence of Puritanism on the Development of Science*. Centre for Theology and the Natural Sciences. Bulletin 21.4. Berkeley, USA.

One Puritan divine of the period argued that it was 'better to lose clothes or coin, than recover either by Satan'. [39]

But the most extraordinary aspect of the rise of the new science in the 17th century, at least to my way of thinking, was the huge change in the way in which the natural world was regarded. If you go back to the beginning of our history in the West, to archaic Greece as depicted by Homer, you are introduced to a world where every part of nature exhibited a sort of spiritual aura. We have a nature shimmering with inhering divinity. With the coming of Plato this view was modified but certainly not entirely lost. Matter, by its very nature, was limited but the perfect intelligible universe, which was its template, was not. There was still beauty in the world and still perfection, but it was a necessarily limited perfection, to be thought of as a reflected beauty emanating from the eternal Forms. In early Christianity, this view was further modified. Nature was created *ex nihilo*, by God. The early Church Fathers, mindful of the dangers of pantheism, needed to assert that the world was not God and the entirety of the cosmos did not exhaust the Being of God. Nonetheless, they were ever mindful of those repeated phrases in Genesis—'*and God saw that it was good*'. Nothing created by God could be dismissed as mere substrate or as some inert stage prop against which the drama of individual salvation was to be played out.

Moreover, through the entire history of Christendom, there existed the powerful idea of The Great Chain of Being. Drawing upon Platonic ideas (especially from the *Timaeus*) and the philosophy of Being, the scholars conceived of a great descending and unbroken chain of being, with God at the summit and then, at an infinite distance below, gradations of being reaching down to through the animal and vegetable world to non-living matter and the least of all existing things. The importance of this notion has been well documented in a well-known study by Professor Arthur Lovejoy.[40] In Christianity, this was not an emanationist idea but it did imply that even the very simplest inert materials, merely by the fact of their *existence*, somehow or other participated in that which was the author of all existence—all *being*.

Two other important ideas connected with the medieval concept of nature also need to be mentioned. The first of these, having its genesis in Platonic philosophy, was the notion of microcosm-macrocosm. In the *Timaeus*, Plato had suggested that the human frame mimics or mirrors the shape of the universe. Many of the early Church Fathers took up this notion in biblical exegesis.[41] It also found expression in the idea of *correspondence* —that the stars, for instance, exerted influence over plants and animals. The second important idea was that of

[39] Wegter-McNelly. Op. cit. pg 25
[40] Lovejoy. A. 1936. *The Great Chain of Being* Harvard Univ. Press.
[41] Harrison, op.cit. pp. 47-51

animals as representing certain *moral* characters in humans (or lack thereof). This found expression in the enormously popular *bestiaries* and *aviaries*, where a range of domesticated and wild animals was described and the habits of each related to human morality or other Christian themes. The common ancestor of these medieval bestiaries is thought to be the *Physiologus* – a text which may date back as early as the 2nd century AD and whose author is unknown.[42] Here, physical and behavioural characteristics (real and imagined) of each animal were presented and moralized for a Christian audience. The later bestiaries of the medieval period follow this model, often drawing from a wide range of sources including the Bible itself, Aristotle, Pliny and other Greek and Roman authors of antiquity. Even today, one can find, in some Catholic churches at any rate, the image of the pelican-in-her-piety as a symbol of Christ (the pelican was thought to feed her young with blood from her own breast).

All of these various ways of understanding the natural world had the effect of giving intrinsic value to the material universe. Plants and animals and even non-living entities were not just a sort of substrate or inert medium. A good, late example of just how nature was viewed can be found in the poetry of Henry Vaughan (1621 -1695). Unlike the Puritans of his day (he was a Cavalier), Vaughan gained his ideas on nature largely from medieval and more ancient sources.

However, during the course of the 17th century, the attitude towards the natural world took a radical turn, and nowhere was this more evident than in Bacon's works. The new science advanced apace not because of the secularisation of society, but because of the secularisation of nature. Dame Nature (which, in an earlier time, Chaucer had described as v*icaire of the Almighty Lorde*[43]) now became an enemy to be overcome or, more precisely, a subject to be interrogated so as to yield up valuable information. Indeed, the tone of Bacon's writings has prompted feminist writers like Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Carolyn Merchant to suggest that Bacon was a misogynist and nature-hater. It is rather difficult to disagree with them when, for instance, you look at the title *Temporis Partus Masculus* (The Masculine Birth of Time) used for one of his unpublished works. [44]

Bacon saw himself as the *buccinator novi temporis* and, in *The Advancement of Learning*, says this:

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42 Clark, W.B. (Ed. & Transl.) 1992. *The Medieval Book of Birds. Hugh of Fouilloy's Aviarium.* Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, Binghampton, New York. p. 4.

43 *Parlement of Foulys* (line 379)

44 Bacon's treatment of nature has been examined in some detail by the British Philosopher, Mary Midgley. See her *Science as Salvation,* 1992. Routledge. London. pp.75-83

> Nor is mine a trumpet which summons and excites men to cut each other to pieces ... but rather to make peace between themselves, and turning with united forces against the Nature of Things, to storm and occupy her castles and strongholds, and extend the bounds of human empire, as far as God Almighty in his goodness may permit.

This interrogation of nature, Bacon believed, would yield up a sort of hidden code whereby God's intentions and plans would be made clear. As Jorge Louis Borges has observed:

> Francis Bacon declared in his *Advancement of Learning* that God offered us two books so that we would not fall into error: the first, the volume of the Scriptures, reveals His will; the second, the volume of the creatures, reveals His power and is the key to the former. Bacon intended much more than the making of a metaphor; he believed that the world was reducible to essential forms (temperatures, densities, weights, colors), which formed, in a limited number, an *abecedarium naturae* or series of letters with which the universal text is written.[45]

This view of nature was taken up by many of the early members of the Royal Society, including its first historian, Thomas Sprat.

One remarkable thing about Sprat's history is the amount of space devoted to a justification of 'the Real Philosophy' (i.e. the new science). The work is divided into three parts. The first of some fifty pages, discusses 'the state of the Ancient Philosophy', the second part comprises of the history proper of the Royal Society in about 100 pages and 'examples' of the new science in a further 160 pages. The third and final part, of about 130 pages is devoted to a defense/justification of the new approach. Given that the first part of the work is used largely to point out the deficiencies in the work of ancient authors it is really little more than a justification for the new approach to science. Thus, in a work of some 440 pages, well over one-third is devoted to defending the new experimental method. A very large part of this defense is devoted to the question of the impact of the new science on religious belief and religious morality.

Why does Sprat find it so important to defend Baconian science in this way? And why does he, and Bacon before him, need to pour scorn on the beliefs of the ancients? All the available evidence suggests that many of the Anglican Divines and other important public figures of the time were very apprehensive of this new emphasis on experimentation and the probing of nature. Richard Corbet's (1582-1633) *Farewell Rewards and Fairies* provides a good example. One can see why Bacon and Sprat wrote as they did. Only when nature is purged of <u>all</u> spiritual content and intrinsic value can it be probed and dissected with a complete

[45] Borges, J.L. 1999. "On the Cult of Books" *In The Total Library – Non-Fiction 1922-1986.* Edited E. Weinberger. Penguin Books, London . Pg 360.

indifference. Experimentation is to become a completely amoral enterprise because 'getting to the bottom of things' is the great and noble task. Here, for instance, is Sprat's account of some experiments by Sir Christopher Wren:

> He was the first Author of the Noble Anatomical Experiment of Injecting Liquors into the Veins of Animals. An Experiment now vulgarly known; but long since exhibited to the Meetings at Oxford. … By this operation divers Creatures were immediately purg'd, vomited, intoxicated, kill'd, or reviv'd according to the quality of the Liquor injected. [46]

One might be tempted to attribute the change to the appearance of Cartesian philosophy, but Bacon (1561-1626), who held exactly the same attitude towards nature, wrote his works well before Descartes' philosophy had become well known (the *Discourse on Method* was published in 1637). Moreover, their methods of enquiry were entirely different. Descartes began with principles that were intuitively derived and these were taken as the premises in the standard deductive method of reasoning. Bacon and his later followers, on the other hand, began with empirical observations and used these inductively to arrive at higher axioms.

In all of this, there is a certain irony. Today, the science popularisers and debunkers of religion like to push the view that the scientific mode of understanding has wholly supplanted the religious mode and represents some sort of advance in real knowledge about our world. They further suppose that science has been able to advance only by sweeping away these earlier and erroneous views. To suggest, then, that the rise of the new science was very much a *religious* development, is very nasty medicine indeed. And it is especially nasty because of the popular image of Puritanism. H.L. Mencken once defined Puritanism (rather unfairly) as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy".

This irony has played itself out in a most unexpected way. When Merton first advanced his theory linking the new science with Puritanism, many of his fellow American sociologists were appalled. As Wegter McNelly points out, many of the early American sociologists were themselves a strange mixture of Puritanism and Comtean positivism.[47] By Merton's time, they had associated themselves with logical positivism and had wholly ditched all religious appurtenances. The great gospel of that time was A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. The thesis here was that scientific knowledge constituted the only genuine form of knowledge. At the same time, there was a concerted push by the sociologists to be accepted into the scientific stable. As Wegter-McNelly points out, they did not wish to be reminded of their origins:

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[46] Sprat, T. *History of the Royal Society*. Op. Cit. Pg 317
[47] Wegter-McNelly, op.cit. pg 26.

> Why did the portion of Merton's original dissertation dealing with Puritanism and science attract the most attention? Because a version of his thesis was at that moment being played out in his very own discipline. Like the Puritans before them, sociologists of the generation that trained Merton found in science a partner that advanced their own cause and mirrored their own interests. … Because empirical science and its positivist epistemology devalued theological knowledge, they could no longer ask questions that sounded overtly 'theological'. With so much at stake in their perception of themselves as building a new secular, scientific discipline, their hesitation to accept Merton's challenge to this self-perception is understandable.[48]

Without realising it, Merton had uncovered a nasty skeleton from the cupboard of the 17th century which served to highlight discrepancies within his own discipline—a discipline anxious to distance itself from its own heritage and to strut its scientific credentials.

There is a further irony in all of this. The secularisation of nature, which was a necessary precursor to the scientific revolution, also removed any trace of intrinsic value in nature. With all links to any higher realm removed, nature was to be valued simply for what it might yield up to human enquiry and human work. That is one of the reasons why, today, we have many serious problems of environmental misuse. The pleas from the scientists and environmentalists for us to respect nature fall on deaf ears, because we have been deprived of the very *means* of that appreciation.

[48] Ibid. pg 27

THE ENDURING PROBLEM OF MONKEY BUSINESS

For many people today, the Scopes 'Monkey Trial' of 1925 represents a watershed in terms of the relationship between science and religion. John Scopes, the defendant in the case, was a schoolteacher at Dayton, Tennessee, who had deliberately incriminated himself so as to challenge the legality of the then current ban on teaching Darwinian evolution in schools. At the time, the whole business was something of a publicity stunt. Performing monkeys cavorted on the lawns near the courthouse and there was a general carnival atmosphere. Newspaper journalists though, lapped it up. There were over 200 of them in attendance, including the famous H.L. Mencken. This ensured that the trial was widely reported, not just in America, but right throughout the Anglosphere. Although Scopes was found guilty and fined $100, the ruling was subsequently overturned on a technicality. This outcome was widely regarded as a victory for common sense and for the independent validity of science.

At the time, though, the drama played out in the courtroom was not seen primarily as a confrontation between science and religion but, rather, as a confrontation between those Christians who believed in the literal truth of *Genesis* (sometimes called "young earth creationists"), and those who believed that evolution was not inconsistent with Christian doctrine. With the passage of time, however, the Scopes Trial came to represent a battle between science and religion, especially in the eyes of science popularisers.

If we now come forward some 80 years, we can find another case often cast as a re-run of the Scopes Trial. This time, however, there was a reversal of roles. Now it was not evolutionary theory battling for legitimacy but an aspect sometimes associated with theistic belief—the so-called Intelligent Design (ID) hypothesis. Put simply, the hypothesis supposes that certain recent findings, especially in the biological sciences, make a strong case for the existence of an unspecified intelligent designer—much like Paley's watchmaker. In 2004 a school board in the town of Dover, Pennsylvania, decided that they would allow high school students to learn of the theory of ID in biology. The curriculum notes stated that:

> Students will be made aware of the gaps/problems in Darwin's theory and of other theories of evolution including, but not limited to, intelligent design. Note: Origins of life is not taught.

This prompted the American Civil Liberties Union to announce a suit against the school board. In the ensuing case, the school board lost, the judgement declaring:

> (We) find that while ID arguments may be true, a proposition on which the Court takes no position, ID is not science. We find that ID fails on three different levels, any one of which is sufficient to preclude a determination that ID is science. They are: (1) ID violates the centuries-old ground rules of science by invoking and permitting supernatural causation; (2) the argument of irreducible complexity, central to ID, employs the same flawed and illogical contrived dualism that doomed creation science in the 1980s; and (3) ID's negative attacks on evolution have been refuted by the scientific community…It is additionally important to note that ID has failed to gain acceptance in the scientific community, it has not generated peer-reviewed publications, nor has it been the subject of testing and research. Expert testimony reveals that since the scientific revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries, science has been limited to the search for natural causes to explain natural phenomena.

Whatever the reader may think of this judgement, it is clear that what is in contention here is very different from the subject matter of the Scopes Trial. The central argument here concerns the integrity of an approach to science called methodological naturalism. This sets out certain conditions/conventions that must be followed for any enterprise to be called scientific. It defines science as an enterprise that excludes claims about supernatural entities; it maintains that claims about the supernatural are untestable and, finally, that admitting any such claims would destroy science as a system of organised enquiry.

Upon first reading, this may appear as reasonable enough but, in fact, the claims of methodological naturalism have been questioned by many prominent philosophers, including those with no religious beliefs. Many readers may, of course, protest on the grounds that philosophers should keep their noses out of the business of scientists. However to suppose that the scientific method is self-validating is, itself, a philosophical assumption. You cannot completely rid science of all metaphysics for many reasons, the most obvious being that the whole scientific enterprise rests upon the assumption that the world of nature is intelligible. There is no good reason to assume merely on the grounds of scientific principles that our knowledge of the world must render up a true account of things. From time to time, the more percipient amongst mathematicians and scientists are astounded by this conformity of the human intellect with the subjects of its enquiry. In 1960, the physicist and Nobel Prize winner, Eugene Wigner, published a widely-quoted paper entitled *The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences*. He argued that the happy coincidence that mathematics and physics were so well matched seemed to be 'unreasonable' and hard to explain. Likewise, an increasing number of biologists and philosophers are astounded by the level of sophisticated order seen in such things as the structure of DNA. The late Anthony Flew, whose conversion from atheism to a

nonspecific form of Deism elicited much public interest, cited this as one of the reasons for his change of belief late in life.

In fact, the supposition that the world must be intelligible comes to us first from the ancient Greek philosophers and then from the medieval scholastic philosophers. It was central to Plato's schema for the world of ideas that the human intellect should have some access to the world of pure forms. This was the only way in which we gained knowledge of the world around us. Much later, the medieval scholastics gave this idea a distinctively Christian interpretation—an interpretation which sustained Western science for the best part of a millennium and allowed great scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Boyle and many others, to make their discoveries. These great discoverers expected to find order in the universe and this gave them the confidence needed to search for it.

The other obvious issue stemming from the attempt to validate science from within the discipline concerns the very definition of the word science, and the term 'scientific method'. For the ancients, science was simply a term for knowledge and the highest form of knowledge was metaphysics—"the science of the real". Only in the modern era has the term come to denote knowledge about the world of matter. Paradoxically, today science suffers from what might be termed a border protection problem, despite this supposed narrowing down in its fields of operation. In addition to the 'hard' sciences, there are areas such as sociology and psychology which now lay claim to being scientific. How does one make a judgement of what constitutes science? For instance in June of 2013, a "Science of Mind" forum in Melbourne formed part of an international conference on happiness and its causes. This implies that happiness (or sadness) can be measured in much the same way (but with different methods) as, say, electromagnetic radiation or hydrostatic pressure. Is this really so? The above mentioned happiness conference included a dissertation by Professor Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist from the USA, on human love where the question was posed "what do studies on the brain tell us about love?" Very little, I would have thought. But no, Fisher has scanned the brains of young paramours and found that when they're focusing on the object of their affection, a whole host of brain parts start lighting up. I can do no better than to quote her directly:

> No wonder lovers talk all night or walk till dawn, write extravagant poetry and self-revealing e-mails, cross continents or oceans to hug for just a weekend, change jobs or lifestyles, even die for one another. Drenched in chemicals that bestow focus, stamina and vigour, and driven by the motivating engine of the brain, lovers succumb to a Herculean courting urge.

I don't want to labour the point, but there does appear to be something fundamentally dodgy about the whole cognitive science scenario. When parts of the brain light up in young lovers, as a result of chemical changes, are such

changes cause or effect? Furthermore, when Professor Fisher views those brain scans on her monitor, some part of her brain presumably lights up (that part responsible for scientific deduction). Some other neuroscientist might then scan her brain to track down the area responsible. But, in so doing, he or she will also excite some part of his or her brain—and so *ad infinitum*. We are back to the old subject-object problem.

A strict definition of science—one that the judgement in the Dover School Case had in mind—lays some emphasis on testing and research. Here again, a great deal of modern science, especially in particle physics, is arguably untestable and relies almost entirely on speculation. Concepts such as String theory, the Landscape, and the Anthropic Principle seem to imply that the famous dictum attributed to Paul Feyerabend, "anything goes", has been taken up with enthusiasm. String theory requires a multi-dimensional universe and the Landscape proposes that our physical laws are simply those that apply to an infinitely small portion of a "megaverse"—a giant landscape of mathematical possibilities. Even the latest version of the Standard Model has about it a sort of esoteric flavour. Let me quote just three sentences from the CERN website, where a useful summary of the Standard Model is given:

> The six quarks are paired in the three generations—the "up quark" and the "down quark" form the first generation, followed by the "charm quark" and "strange quark", then the "top quark" and "bottom (or beauty) quark". Quarks also come in three different "colours" and only mix in such ways as to form colourless objects. The six leptons are similarly arranged in three generations—the "electron" and the "electron neutrino", the "muon" and the "muon neutrino", and the "tau" and the "tau neutrino".

Scientific descriptions of this nature remind me of a comment once made by the travel writer, Peter Fleming, in relation to the public statuary of Rio de Janeiro: "So vehement a confusion of thought, so arbitrary an alliance of ideas, takes reason captive and paralyses criticism".

There are also intractable problems with the term 'scientific method'. Is there really such a thing? Philosophers of science seem to disagree on this matter. Sir Karl Popper famously maintained that the method of induction, set out in the earliest days of the scientific revolution by Francis Bacon, was useless. Here, he was simply taking Hume's scepticism concerning causation to its logical conclusion. Furthermore, he maintained that the true measure of a scientific postulate or theory was not its verifiability but it falsifiability. Other philosophers of science went even further. Feyerabend suggested that the conduct of science should employ "epistemological anarchism" and, to this end, he wrote a book titled *Against Method*. Yet again, Thomas Kuhn has maintained that what we confidently assert as the scientific method is, at base, a subjective enterprise which depends on historical circumstances. There has been, throughout history, a

number of scientific revolutions or "paradigms", each claiming to have discovered laws concerning the world of nature—laws which have subsequently required significant alteration.

Fortunately, most scientists ignore all these theories and pursue their studies on the basis of common sense. They are happy to accept the intelligibility of the world and to assert that the knowledge they gain about it is objective, not subjective. In fact, the problem of the validity of science and its method only runs into problems when scientists venture outside of their discipline and begin to lay down metaphysical laws. Whereas the commonsense version of methodological naturalism remains neutral in respect of the existence of the supernatural, another position, sometimes called metaphysical naturalism or scientific naturalism, banishes any concept of the supernatural from all human inquiry. This is the position of people like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. They have somehow formed the notion that belief in any supernatural entity competes with science in some way. In effect their view of science is a religious one and they are zealous proselytisers. Many well-known philosophers have commented upon this, including Mary Midgley (*Science as Salvation*, 1992; *Evolution as a Religion*, 1985) and the Australian philosopher David Stove (*Darwinian Fairytales*, 1995). It also brings to mind Chesterton's quip concerning the enthusiasm of H.G. Wells for a scientific future—"(He) has sold his birthright for a pot of message".

One can see why people like Dawkins and Dennett take this line. The enormous success of modern science as an explanatory system can easily lead certain of its devotees to suppose that the enterprise is not only wholly self-validating, but also capable of supplying answers to those enduring questions of purpose and meaning in the world. These very aspects were once the exclusive province of philosophy and religion but, since the time of John Locke, philosophy at least, has become merely the handmaiden of science. We might recall that Locke regarded the purpose of philosopher as being no more than to provide the services of "an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish which lies in the way to knowledge". The explanatory power of religion has fared even worse. Today, it too is often seen as part of Locke's metaphysical 'rubbish', lying in the path of knowledge. At best, it is only allowed as a private belief system, to be discussed only by consenting adults in the decent obscurity of churches and coffee houses. Its only legitimate public purpose is to give comfort, not to explain. But Locke, or for that matter Hume, has not produced some sort of absolute knock-down argument or endgame. As the American philosopher Thomas Nagel points out, "… our secular culture has been browbeaten into regarding the reductive research program as sacrosanct, on the ground that anything else would not be science". He goes on to explain his doubts concerning the sort of science advocated by Dawkins and Dennett:

> My skepticism is not based on religious belief, or on a belief in any definite alternative. It is just a belief that the available scientific evidence, in spite of the consensus of scientific opinion, does not in this matter rationally require us to subordinate the incredulity of common sense. That is especially true with regard to the origin of life. The world is an astonishing place, and the idea that we have in our possession the basic tools needed to understand it is no more credible now than it was in Aristotle's day.

Nagel's own philosophical position is best described as a form of neutral monism. He believes it possible that matter itself may contain some irreducible mental content, allowing for self-organisation and a natural teleology. He is not disposed towards the idea of ID, lacking, as he says, the *sensus divinitatis*. But neither will he rule it out of order. For him, the most powerful scientific arguments of the proponents of ID are negative ones—a consideration of the probability of complex molecules such as DNA arising by chance, for instance. But, without question, he sees the biggest problem of scientific naturalism as being its attempted explanation of such things as human consciousness, human cognition, and the concept of value. Similar issues were also of concern to David Stove and Mary Midgley.

The seriousness of this problem is generally not well appreciated. As Nagel points out, the proponents of scientific naturalism seem to take things like 'value' or 'truth' for granted, but they have little warrant to do so. The application of evolutionary theory to explain our own cognitive capacity actually undermines our confidence in our ability to speak of 'truth'. Mechanisms of belief formation acquired by natural selection arise because of their general usefulness, not their truth content. As a corollary, evolutionary naturalism, as a subset of scientific naturalism, implies that we cannot take any of our convictions seriously, including the scientific world picture upon which evolutionary naturalism is itself based.

There are other problems with the severe application of scientific naturalism. One interesting consequence of banning all supernatural entities from human discourse concerns the use of numbers in science. It hardly needs to be pointed out that mathematics is of critical importance to modern science. As the philosopher Elliott Sober points out, the idea that numbers have a separate and non-subjective existence is quite a respectable position in philosophy. It is sometimes called mathematical Platonism and it entails that numbers are, in some way, supernatural entities. Sober puts it this way:

> Consider the claim that there are infinitely many prime numbers. This is a true statement as any number theorist will tell you. But what are these things called numbers? What must they be like for this statement to be true? First it is important not to confuse numbers and numerals; numerals are names for numbers. The statement about primes isn't about numerals; it's about the things those names name. The statement would still be true if there were no language users, and hence, no names for the numbers. Indeed

the statement would still be true if there were no matter in the universe. This is what leads Platonists to claim that numbers are supernatural entities.

The existence of numbers in this way, as non-physical, non-mental entities has been postulated by many famous philosophers/mathematicians, including, Frege, Russell, Quine and Gödel.

If you do not think that numbers qualify as being supernatural, what about some super-intelligent alien civilisation? A scientific postulate called Directed Panspermia has been seriously advanced in the past by notable scientists including Carl Sagan, Fred Hoyle, and Francis Crick. Here, it is supposed that life on earth began when our planet was 'seeded' with life by some other advanced life form elsewhere in the cosmos. Would this count as ID?

Yet another problem with scientific naturalism concerns the evolutionary explanation of religion. Since belief in some form of supernatural being(s) has been a feature of human societies throughout recorded history, sociobiologists obviously need to explain the continued existence of such a pervasive human trait in terms of conferred survival value. It might be possible to explain it away as a 'spandrel'—a particular development or feature which, although conferring no evolutionary advantage itself, is bound up with some other feature or development which does confer such an advantage. This is hardly a convincing argument. It is an idea which has every advantage except that of clarity, elegance and a demonstrated connection to reality. More promising is the idea that religious belief was once a useful trait, allowing consolidation of power, tribal integrity, etc., but has now outlived its usefulness as a mechanism enhancing survival. Just as the human coccyx, or tail bone, was once useful (as part of an ape's tail), so it is with religion. We no longer need it as a feature enhancing survival. Indeed, as Dawkins and Dennett tell us, it is counterproductive in this regard. But if this is true, why on the same basis, should our belief in scientific naturalism be any more that a temporary adaptation enhancing survival? We may well jettison it one day and move on to something more advantageous.

★ ★ ★ ★

If we now go back to the ruling in the 2004 case concerning the Dover School Board, it seems to me that the judgement did not consider all of the complexities involved. There are no "centuries old ground rules" for the conduct of science. And ID's supposed "negative attacks" on evolutionary theory have never been "refuted", only denied. A refutation would require that science could supply answers to the very real problems that have been raised by the defenders of ID, problems which have also been independently recognised by many philosophers who do not support the idea of ID.

One need not believe in ID as a necessary part of a religious belief system. Indeed, one of the expert witnesses for the prosecution in the Dover School case

was Professor John Haught, a Catholic theologian from Georgetown University in the USA. Likewise, one does not have to dismiss ID as being false in order to be a scientist. Here, I agree with Elliot Sober who has provided what he terms a "more modest" claim for methodological naturalism:

> Methodological naturalism does not assert that the only way to gain knowledge is by the methods of science. It is a thesis about what scientific theories should assert, not about what non-scientific statements might have to offer.

But are all of the claims of ID non-scientific? It seems to me that there is at least one claim which ought to be regarded as possibly scientific. This concerns the function of the DNA molecule. The biochemist Stephen Meyer has suggested that what is unique about DNA is not so much its structure, but its function. It carries coded information of enormous complexity and such information is not a physical entity any more than a computer program is. An empty computer disk and one containing a sophisticated computer code are both physically the same. Here, I think, the familiar argument against ID proposed by Hume, an argument based on analogy, does not apply. It is reasonable enough to suppose that complex structures can arise via the operations of natural selection, but the appearance of coded information is not quite the same thing. We must also keep in mind the fact that DNA, or something very similar to it, had to appear in evolutionary history before natural selection could get under way. As Thomas Nagel points out, the coming into existence of the genetic code—an arbitrary mapping of nucleotide sequences into amino acids, together with mechanisms which can read the code and carry out its instructions—seems particularly resistant to being revealed as probable given physical law alone.

C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay titled *Bulverism*. Here a false method of refutation by an imaginary character, Ezekiel Bulver, was explained.

> You must show that a man is wrong before you start explaining why he is wrong. The modern method is to assume without discussion that he is wrong and then distract his attention from this (the only real issue) by busily explaining how he became so silly. In the course of the last fifteen years I have found this vice so common that I have had to invent a name for it. I call it "Bulverism".

A certain amount of Bulverism is almost certainly in play in the ID debate—"you only support ID because you are a Christian". I also suspect that the more militant of the scientific naturalists may have overplayed their hand in this regard. As the climate change debate has clearly shown, it is not enough for scientists or science popularisers simply to ridicule those who harbour doubts as to the validity of the claims. They must provide convincing argument backed up by data. If this is not done, the general public will lose faith, not just in their claims, but in the whole scientific enterprise. And that would be a pity for ultimately it is the

common sense of ordinary people which drives the whole show. They pay for the research.

H.L. Mencken learned this back in 1925. Before the Scopes Trial, he was concerned that there would be little to report so, with help from the poet Edgar Lee Masters, he had a thousand fake flyers printed off and distributed to the Dayton locals. The flyers informed locals that "fundamentalist and miracle worker," Dr. Elmer Chubb, would be coming to Dayton for a "public demonstration of healing, casting out devils, and prophesying." He would also allow himself to be bitten by any poisonous reptile, drink any poison bought to him, and preach in numerous languages, including archaic ones. Alas, the hoped for enthusiastic reactions were not forthcoming. The locals had, over the years, seen a great many of such prophets and miracle workers come and go. They simply shrugged or shook their heads and went on about their usual business. "The simian faithful of Appalachia" did not perform to Mencken's expectations. I suspect the same will happen to the prophets of scientific naturalism.

IF YOU SEEK THEIR MONUMENT, LOOK AROUND YOU

Remembering the dead is one of the central attributes of what we call Tradition. Indeed, as Chesterton tells us, Tradition implies that sort of democracy in which the dead are given a vote. Remembrance of the dead is a feature of nearly every human society but, historically, it has taken on special significance in the west where belief in the immortality of the individual soul gave it a distinct prominence. Commemoration of the saints, for instance, continues in some Christian Traditions to this day, by way of feast days. But, for the great bulk of past humanity in the Christian West, the chief aid to remembrance has been the funerary monument or inscription.

"In lapidary inscriptions", said Dr Johnson, "no man is under oath". This is a wise reflection, for few of us wish to speak ill of the dead. I have yet to come across a tombstone whose inscription reads "here lays the remains of an evil man" or something similar. One of the most famous lapidary inscriptions is that incised upon the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul's Cathedral, London—"*Si monumentum requiris circumspice*". This translates as 'If you seek his monument, look around you'. It is, of course, a very fitting inscription because Sir Christopher Wren designed the Cathedral. It is this idea of kindling a remembrance of some person(s) via general surroundings which I find particularly moving. And no more so than when the surroundings are natural, not human-made.

We naturally think of a monument as a work of human hands: a statue, an inscribed tombstone, a public facility such as a sports oval, etc., but perhaps the greatest monuments to those who have gone before us are not to be found in "storied urn or animated bust", as Gray's *Elegy* has it, but in nature itself. Here, I am not thinking of large geographic areas, but rather of smaller features of landscape. Naming countries, provinces, or the sites of cities or townships after deceased persons is no guarantee that their memory will be honoured. Few Victorians wake up each day and think of Queen Victoria and few Sydneysiders pay their respects to Viscount Sydney. But when we come down to much more specific natural features, the association with past humans is much more obvious and impresses itself upon us to a far greater degree. Anzac Cove is an obvious example but, of course, it is a monument to many thousands of dead soldiers, not just one person or one family.

It is in these natural sites that the association between the person(s) and the landscape is most intensely felt. Think, for instance of Dr Johnson's famous remark upon Iona—the Isle of Columba: "That man is little to be envied … whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona". Or, to take an even more impressive example, think of that rugged rock, rising sheer from the wild Atlantic off the Irish coast which is known as Skellig Michael—Michael's Rock. Here, the very inhospitality of the surroundings—the jagged rocks, the lashing seas, the furious winds and screaming seabirds—evoke the ideal of the Christian monastic lifestyle and lead us directly to the contemplation of the lives of the early monks and of what it means to believe that famous Gospel passage—"My Kingdom is not of this world". A visit to Skellig Michael may not remind us specifically of St Michael, but it will certainly remind us of those who dedicated the island to him and lived their austere lives in pursuit of an ideal.

But in all the examples I have given above, none has any guarantee of permanency. Just as the Soviets changed St Petersburg into Leningrad (now reversed, thankfully), some future human society, wholly antagonistic to Christianity, may call Skellig Michael something else altogether. And, as Shelley's *Ozymandias* attests, even the greatest of human-made monuments finally decay and are forgotten. Those that have managed to survive from remotest antiquity more often remind us of human folly rather than of human virtue. Again, it is Dr Johnson who strikes exactly the right note when he considers the Pyramids to be "a monument to the insufficiency of human enjoyment".

I can think of only one 'natural' monument to the dead which is permanent (inasmuch as anything in this world can be) and it is a most unusual monument indeed. And it will require some introduction.

If you travel the back country roads in almost any part of southern Australia you will invariably come across ruined or abandoned homesteads. As the nature of agriculture and pastoralism has changed, along with the nature of the markets for primary produce, the amount of land needed to support a farm family has increased markedly. As a result, much amalgamation has occurred, one family now farming an area that may have once supported four or five such families. Concurrent with this has been an increasing trend for present-day farming families to reside in larger country towns, commuting out to the farm each day. This, in part, explains the presence of so many abandoned homesteads.

Those of the more recent past or those built of brick or stone may still be recognisable as dwellings but the site of many earlier homesteads, constructed predominantly from wood, can now only be discerned by a pile of chimney stones or a few scattered bricks. Indeed, on some sites, even these have gradually been

covered by soil or vegetation. But, in nearly all cases, one legacy from the past always remains. I am referring to certain hardy and perennial garden plants such as daffodils, jonquils, and lilies, still growing on old garden sites.

Each year, in spring, the site of thousands of otherwise unrecognisable homestead sites once again become visible to human eyes, marked out by clusters of flowers. Indeed, on some sites the vegetative markers are always visible—the leafy extravagance of the agapanthus. I know of some sites where this annual process of renewal has continued for at least 150 years. Old men have told me that their fathers knew these sites as ruins when they were boys. The flower testimony, if we may call it that, has survived livestock grazing and the grazing of rabbits and kangaroos, droughts, fires, locust plagues and every conceivable adversity.

We think immediately, when we see such a sight, of some pioneering housewife, now utterly forgotten in the annals of history. Those flower bulbs or tubers, transported by dray or wagon from distant parts, were a link—perhaps the only enduring link—with a wider civilisation. They were a tangible reminder, in the midst of the lonely Australian bush, of what the term 'culture' meant to a non-Aboriginal Australian. They evoked memories of loved ones, of childhood, or of distant lands. They were a statement, too, of the fact that the beauty of nature could be further magnified by human hands.

For us, though, the sight of these flowers evokes other emotions. It is unfashionable now to praise the early pioneers because of some assumed connection between their coming and the demise of the Aborigines. But, of course, most of these small farmers came after the squatting era and at a time when the Aborigines were already in decline. And these early settler families, perhaps just as much as those Aboriginal families who had roamed the land before them, are now utterly forgotten, their lives, their labours, and their names unknown. Perhaps some mouldering tombstone at the local cemetery may record their life and death, but the connection to a particular home site has now been lost. All that we have, to remind us of the 'unknown settler' are those nodding daffodils in spring or the unexpected splash of green leaves as the agapanthus defies the drought-stricken landscape around it. The sight may cause us to recall those sentiments expressed in Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* or in Gray's *Elegy*.

These abandoned sites will not be recorded by the National Trust or any other heritage organisation. Those ageing locals who may have had some knowledge concerning earlier homestead sites are now disappearing one by one and their knowledge dies with them. A few sites may be recorded in local histories but many reach back beyond the available historical resources.

But amidst all these sad reflections on the brevity of human life, the flowers remind us of something far more uplifting. There is an incurable optimism in the human condition and it is echoed in the annual extravagance of the daffodil and jonquil and lily. "Full many a flower", the poet tells us "is born to waste its sweetness on the desert air". But it is not wasted, even if no human eyes are there to experience it. From the time of Plato and perhaps earlier our tradition has held that Beauty has an existence outside of the human mind. The pioneering housewife, tending her little garden in the vastness of the Australian bush, may not have recognised this explicitly, but it is implicit in her actions. That sentiment, however vague in her mind, finds its realisation each spring in a thousand lonely bush paddocks. Each year, the initial actions of that long dead housewife and mother, in planting and tending her flowers, is commemorated by the plants themselves. In the case of the agapanthus, it is especially fitting that its name derives from the Greek and the literal meaning is 'love-flower'.

And when the last vestiges of that colossal statue of Ozymandias dissolve forever into the desert sands, those homestead flowers will still produce their seasonal testament.

REIDY'S HARVEST

The sermon for that Sunday took the Gospel account of the rich landowner who had built extra barns to accommodate his bumper harvest. The punch line, delivered with great gusto by Fr McGuire, left Reidy with a mixture of guilt and apprehension. Wasn't it himself who had a bumper oat crop and who had pegged out the site for his second haystack that very morning before Mass? And did he not have more than enough in the first stack to cover his needs? Then, there was the matter of the mouse plague. Micky Skehill avowed that the rodents were on the march and that farms not forty miles away had been completely eaten out. A vague notion of some biblical plague had settled in Reidy's mind and he was half convinced that the Gospel parable, which he had unaccountably confounded with certain other themes from the Bible, was about to take on a more modern form. He might even be called to his Maker before the stack was built, just as in the Gospel account.

On the way home, he communicated some of these concerns to his wife Mary but she, being both a shrewd and practical woman, reminded him of the parable of the Talents and of his duty to accept his bumper crop as a manifestation of God's Providence. By the time they arrived home, Reidy was in a much better frame of mind.

The new stack was started the very next day. He employed old Wharton as the builder while his own two sons carted in the sheaves with the wagon, pulled by Hercules and Captain, and forked them up onto the stack. Wharton crawled round the stack on his hands and knees, placing each sheaf carefully. Each time a sheaf landed beyond his immediate reach he swore at the two boys and delivered advice regarding the proper way to throw a sheaf. He also considered himself an expert on the matter of pitchforks and repeated his opinion to the point of monotony that Australian-made pitchforks were next to useless. "They can't get the right temper in the steel and the set is all wrong. Get yourselves some decent American forks with good hickory handles", he said. "A good fork will work with you, not against you."

By the time the stack was ready for thatching it was the talk of the district. Even a few people from the town came out to view it. It was perfectly proportioned and built to last. So tightly had Wharton packed the sheaves with their stub ends out that not even the smallest mouse could gain entry. A stack like that would shed water from the heaviest storm and the sheaves would retain their

quality for years. In the course of a few weeks, the whole business of human frailty and the vanity of human wishes had completely left Reidy's mind.

But that all changed the day that William Crewther drove up the dusty track to the homestead in his gig. Crewther was the local insurance agent and, of late, his Company had decided to branch out into farm insurance. "It's a case of risk management", said Crewther, spouting the latest jargon from his trade. He walked over to the new haystack. "Take this haystack for instance. You could lose the lot in a week if the mouse plague comes down much further." Warming to his theme, Crewther then began to enumerate a great range of natural disasters—fire, floods, field crickets, locusts, and even cockatoos. Examples were given of neighbours who had suffered from just such events. Ryan, for instance, was eaten out by rabbits which had descended on his property from places north. The final straw was the 'Destruction Notice' from the Rabbit Inspector. Ryan, it was said, went to an early grave as a result. And, of course, everyone knew of the disaster at the Hogan farm when a huge flock of "the divil's canaries" (as Hogan called them) had completely wiped out his newly sown paddock.

Given this huge array of actual and possible disasters, it was imperative that Reidy take action to secure the future of his farm. Again, with such a plethora of impending disasters it was more than likely that oaten chaff would be in short supply next year, fetching huge prices. Reidy was sitting on a potential gold mine. He ought to value the stack accordingly.

Crewther's sales pitch finally ended when Mary arrived on the scene with a tray of scones and two cups of tea. Crewther squatted down in a most unprofessional manner to drink his tea and light up his pipe. He waited for Reidy's response. Father McGuire's sermon suddenly came back to Reidy but from a new and wholly satisfactory angle. He could now see a way to bring some certainty to the future. The stack might, indeed, be lost, but he would not be wholly at the mercy of any great natural disaster. It was not actually an attempt to outsmart God but more a case of being diligent like the man with the Talents. When Crewther produced the papers from his flash leather attaché case, Reidy signed up without hesitation. A jubilant Crewther shook him by the hand, cleaned out his pipe and stoked up with another plug of tobacco. He drove off a happy man, congratulating himself on his powers of persuasion and his ability as a salesman. There was a tidy little commission which would come his way once Reidy's cheque was cleared.

At the bottom of the hill, some instinct caused Crewther to turn and look back to the Reidy farm. A plume of dense smoke rose into the sky. He turned the horse and drove back at full speed. By the time he reached the homestead the

haystack was well and truly on fire. A light northerly fanned the eager flames and Reidy's hopelessly inadequate Furphy water cart had no demonstrable effect on the course of the fire. Within half an hour it was clear that the stack was lost. It would burn for another day or so and no amount of water from Reidy's hoses would quench the deep-seated fire.

There was no disputing the cause. A trail of ash and blackened straw led from precisely the spot where Crewther had tapped out the ash from his pipe by striking the latter on the heel of his boot. A grim-faced Crewther shuffled through the contents of his case and finally located a claim form. For the second time that day, Reidy signed at the designated place and handed back the elegant fountain pen to Crewther.

That evening, the Reidy's sat down to the table with grave expressions. Mary had been crying. The two boys arrived home from their weekly trip into town for market day. They handed Reidy the newspaper. No-one spoke and the only sound was that of rustling paper as he turned the pages. Suddenly, his countenance changed and a trace of a smile appeared. "Listen to this" he said, holding the paper closer to the Tilley lamp: "A Department of Agriculture spokesman confirmed that, as a result of good rains during the growing season, the supply of oaten hay this year would far outstrip demand, leading to extremely low prices for chaff." Reidy reached for the pencil on the mantelpiece and began to scribble figures on the newspaper. When the calculations were complete, his smile broadened. "Isn't God's Providence a wonderful thing", he said. "Indeed", said Mary. "And wasn't it Crewther who failed to heed the Lord's lesson regarding the laying up of treasures and was now reaping the consequences?" "That's surely true", said Reidy as he cut himself an extra-large piece of ham. He was feeling exceptionally prosperous. "I think I might insure the sheep—and Hercules and old Captain", he added, by way of an afterthought. "And we'll get some of those American pitchforks, just to save old Wharton from the fires of hell with all his cursing".

(*Based on an actual happening in central Victoria*)

THE MAN WHO SAW ENDS[49]

> And the Lord God took the man, and put him in the Garden to dress it and to keep it. *Genesis* II

On this, at least, all the locals agreed. Ned Irvine's hill might be ninety percent stone and ten percent rabbits, but at least it had history. At the base of the southern slope there is a patch of spongy soil where, so they say, you can still see the deep ruts made by the Major's wagons[50] as they came down from Mount Alexander, axles groaning and brake blocks squealing through the wattle scrub. Just above the spot, not thirty metres away, is a massive granite tor, rent from top to bottom by a huge split which had been further hollowed out by a million years of wind-blown sand. It stands there like some Easter Island statue. And it was here that Simple Jim lived in earlier days. He had covered the top with sheets of rusty tin and giant slabs of bark dragged up from the old sleeper cutters camp on the creek.

No-one knew of Simple Jim's background. Rumour had it that his biological mother died giving birth and that it was the difficult birth that had damaged his brain. Whatever the case, old Ned Irvine and his wife Mary had turned up to church one Sunday with a sickly looking young boy perched between them on the gig. They were tight-lipped about the whole business and would only refer to him as "the poor unfortunate". At first, he lived in the house with them, coming inside only for meals and to sleep. Then, one evening, he did not come in when Mary called. It was old Ned's dog, Rattler, who eventually led them to the rock and to the boy, asleep on a bed of freshly pulled bracken fern. He looked so peaceful that they left him there, and from that day forward, the rock became Simple Jim's home. He refused to sleep in the house. No 'special' schools existed then, so he spent his days roaming around the farm.

There are two types of 'simple' people—those who cannot understand us, and those whom we cannot understand. Jim was in the latter category. Dr Johnson once described a "genius" as "a mind of great general powers turned to a particular purpose". Jim was such a genius, but his mind was turned to an idea of nature alien to us today. His only interest was in determining 'ends' for the natural world around him. Aristotle and the Schoolmen would have understood him,

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[49] This short story was written for a literary competition launched by a government conservation body in Northern Victoria many years ago.
[50] Major Mitchell's expedition passed Mount Alexander in 1836.

but we have long since lost that knowledge. Jim saw in the whole of nature, nothing but things striving purposefully towards some end or goal. Young saplings, straining towards the sun, yearned to become big trees; the rainbow birds, coming each spring, yearned to build their nesting burrows in the cool soil of the creek bank; even the rocks on his hill seemed to yearn for flat land. In such a world teeming with purposeful ends, Jim's mind had to make choices on which ends to follow. He chose water.

Like the rocks, water yearned for lower ground. When the driving winter rains lashed the hill, water raced down exposed granite pavements into rills and gutters, thence to a foam-flecked stream moving across the grassy lower slopes until it reached the gully head. Jim followed the water down, often dropping dry leaves in a tiny stream near the hilltop and scrambling down after them. But following water was exhausting work and, from time to time, he needed to sit down and rest. A notion arose in his mind, dimly at first, then with increasing clarity, that if he needed to rest in this way, water would need to do likewise. This is when he began to change the whole appearance of the hill and the creek.

At first, his changes were only small. Where he thought the small streams of water were "running too hard", he made little rest spots by placing sticks and rocks across the gutters. During winter and spring, his whole day was spent on the hill constructing his little check banks to give the water a rest. In summer when the hill turned to dust and brown stubs of grass, he moved down to the main creek where water seeping down from small springs still managed a feeble flow. Here, his constructions were more substantial. Rock groynes and logs forced the water into pools of rest. They were more numerous on the steep, upper sections of the creek where fast-flowing water had bitten deeply into the granite soil in its mad haste to reach its 'end'. On the flatter sections, Jim let the water move more freely because it didn't need to rest up as often. And so, there arose along the creek a series of runs and pools these, indeed, being the proper 'end' of a creek bed..

And the landscape, in its turn, responded. Other 'ends', it seemed to Jim, were being looked after. He did not really notice this until after the myxo came. That year, all the rabbits on the hill got sick and died. Then, in the next year, small gum and wattle seedlings grew up in the soil which had accumulated behind his little walls and groynes. Plants that he had not noticed before appeared on the hillside. Down in the creek, the pools of water became fringed with rushes and the nightly chorus of frogs confirmed in Jim's mind that their 'ends' were being met too.

When old Ned died, Mary was moved into a home and the Health people came to take Jim "into proper care". Ryan, the policeman went with them. He still has bad dreams about that day. Down at the Institution, Jim lasted no time. He had lost his 'ends'. And his loss was far greater than we could imagine, because we see the non-human world around us simply in terms of mechanical cause and effect. A millennium ago, our ancestors would have regarded Simple Jim as quite normal. But, of course, they lived in the Dark Ages.

LIFE AT WALLABY RIDGE

Extracts From The Drew Shinyseat Diaries 1995-7

PREFATORY NOTE

It was with not without a great deal of soul-searching that I finally decided to publish these extracts from the daily diary of my cousin, Drew Shinyseat, who died tragically in a motor car accident earlier this year. Drew's sensitive account of local happenings at Wallaby Ridge are highly personal in nature and, in a sense, I felt that publication would constitute a sort of betrayal of confidence. However, in the end, I was persuaded to publish on the advice of my good friend and noted psychologist, Dr. Kellogg Allbran. As he has pointed out, Drew's account of happenings at Wallaby Ridge constitute a valuable resource for students of socio-political trends at the grass roots.

Drew began his diary after his retirement from the Bendigo Office of the Federal Department of Policy Change, where, for many years, he was a Senior Projects Officer. With the coming of the Rudd- Gillard Government, an enormous increase in workload combined with a heavy schedule of departmental re-organisations took their toll, forcing Drew into voluntary redundancy.

The extracts published here are, of course, only a very small part of the daily diaries and the particular choices made clearly reflect my own preferences and, no doubt, my own biases. However, I have tried to select the entries in such a way as to reflect the range of issues which Drew commented upon in his daily writing. They will I hope, give a valuable insight into the spectrum of issues confronting a typical community in 'small town Australia'.

John Ciaran Casey, Dec. 1997

1995

Jan 12th

Wallaby Ridge is not one of the better known suburbs of Bendigo. In fact I should say that very few people other than myself have a clear idea of just where it is in relation to nearby Kangaroo Flat. This really results from one of those accidents of history—the early explorers obviously saw a kangaroo at Kangaroo Flat earlier than the wallaby at Wallaby Ridge and the former suburb has always maintained its ascendancy. Nonetheless, I can remember the time when you boarded the old No. 53 tram from Charing Cross and rattled out to the

picturesque mullock heaps and poppet heads of Wallaby Ridge. A lot of gold was recovered there and that brings me to the point of this story.

My young nephew, Gavin Sandalbeard lives out at Wallaby Ridge in a sort of rural-urban interface. Gavin is very heavily into self-sufficiency and macro-organics. As far as I know, he is the only person in Victoria to grow and market organically grown emus. Gavin is also very active in the conservation area and is the chairperson of the Friends of Wallaby Association. He came to me last week in a very agitated state. It appears that the giant multinational, Balrog-Ogre Mining has just been granted a lease to re-work the mullock heaps at Wallaby Ridge without any prior consultation with Gavin and the three other members of the Friends of Wallaby Association.

This, as Gavin points out, will completely destroy the local environment and could have far ranging consequence in the area of ozone depletion and global warming as well. The unique geography of the mullock heaps and their attendant unique soil structures has led to the evolution of a unique, pristine ecotome with unique floristic and faunal elements. The Wallaby Ridge mullock is home to the tiny, very rare, perhaps unique, mullock worm, *Nemataureus wallabensis*, which has so far been found nowhere else in Victoria. By co-incidence, its discoverer happens to be Gavin himself who combines a bit of amateur nematodology with his emu-raising.

Other residents of Wallaby Ridge have contacted *The Clarion* with concerns related to increased traffic and dangers to children from drifting sand. Balrog-Ogre have been asked to provide a full environmental impact assessment, a hydro-geologic study, a sociological assessment and a Denholm-Fourier Analysis of least-impact traffic flow. In a bid to allay fears regarding noise and traffic, Baldrog-Ogre have agreed to use horse drawn vehicles and steam powered equipment only. One elderly resident, now unfortunately not in full possession of his senses, said it reminded him of the old days.

★ ★ ★ ★

Feb. 15th

I issue the following warning to all plumbers and "do-it-yourself" handypersons. Do not, on any account, believe those signs which you will come across from time to time in the more discreet business quarters advertising plumbing supplies. I made the mistake of doing so a few weeks ago. The sign in question read "Pipes—Water and Dry" and, being in need of a few 25mm elbows, assorted unions and a bottle of Draino, I ventured into what I thought was a quaint, old world hardware store. Finding it difficult to locate familiar items on the shelves

(I was obviously in the software department), I rang on a quaint little bell whose shape and form cannot be properly described in this morally upright diary. Sufficient to say there was some resemblance to unmentionable body parts. A person of indeterminate sex wearing rings on most visible appendages and clothed in a flowing caftan drifted into view through the smoky haze of an adjacent doorway. Following a brief exchange, it became clear that my pronunciation of "hardware" (I do have the remnants of an Oxford accent—Daddy was the late Sir Bulvers Shinyseat, OBE) was causing problems and the sales assistant persisted in correcting me and pointing to a stand emblazoned with the word "hardcore".

Needless to say, I received no satisfaction, despite the assurance of the salesperson that I would. Fortunately, the Big X Supermarket (open 25 hrs on Sunday) stocked the required items and I was able to pick up the Christmas plum pud at the same time.

Nor should you suppose that this is just an isolated case. I ran into similar problems a few weeks earlier when I required the services of an escort. Out of the blue, my great aunt, Lady Grydpype-Thynne phoned from Mastiff-on-Tyne to inform me of her imminent visit to Bendigo. It was her intention, she said, to do a quick tour of places of worship in Bendigo. I should explain that aunty is a very religious person and is the current chairperson of the New World Missionary Society. The Society, with headquarters in a remote part of Gondwandaland, Africa, has set as its goal, the bringing of Christianity to North America and Scandinavia. She always was an ambitious person. But I digress. As it happened, I was in the middle of an important conference (sponsored by the Kennett govt.) on prioritisation of society megatrends and privatisation of a few remaining public institutions (we are looking very closely at the East Bagshot Mechanics Institute). I simply did not have the time to show aunty around. Hence the need for an escort/guide.

I rang the Total Satisfaction Escort Service after perusing an advertisement in *The Clarion*. This Company was offering a "Christmas Special" and had even gone to the expense of including a nice Christmas message, appropriate at this time of Christian rejoicing, to their established clientele.[51] Naturally, I was impressed. The lady answering the phone had an exceptionally pleasant voice and could not have been more helpful. I must say though, that I was a little taken aback when she inquired of auntie's sexual preferences. However, I assumed the best because maiden aunts can sometimes feel a little uncomfortable with the opposite sex, particularly in the Colonies. I chose the "24 hr full treatment", not

[51] Such an advertisement did appear in *The Bendigo Advertiser* at about this time.

wishing to exhibit any sort of meanness or frugality. After all, auntie had been very kind and we have been included in her will. Readers can imagine my surprise when, on the following day, auntie appeared on my doorstep, very much *en déshabillé* and in the company of a police officer. In deference to auntie, I cannot disclose further details of this terrible ordeal. Sufficient to say that auntie has vowed never to return to this "barbaric corner of the Empire".

★ ★ ★ ★

Feb. 28th

What the hell is happening to this Country! Fascism is surely on the march again and our ancient rights are being trampled by ever more assertive and unjust laws. Why, just the other day some swine actually tried to curtail freedom of trade by suggesting that local nightclubs ought to close at 5am in the morning rather than the customary 7am to prevent a further upsurge in violence and drunken behaviour. Imagine what Alfred Deakin or Sir John Quick would have said—they must be turning in their graves.

Speaking on this matter only last week, Dr. Kellogg Allbran, a local recidivist youth support psychiatrist, reminded us of the need to understand the psychological needs of today's youth. "Violence in modern youth is no more than an emotional safety valve", he said. "They are simply not equipped to deal with the pressures of modern society, particularly with their useless baggage of outmoded moral values and other silly superstitions". Allbran blamed churches, the Boy Scouts & Girl Guides Movement and the Police Force for much of the problem. "They have given the youth of Bendigo a stereotyped and totally inadequate moral framework in which to operate". Allbran's views have been endorsed by the lead singer of the local pop group, Mangy Dogs. Speaking from his condemned caravan on the Bendigo Creek, the hirsute pop idol, Jimmy Sphincter (he had his name changed from Cecil Stanthorpe-Rhodes by deed poll) scathingly dismissed charges of violent behaviour on the part of his drummer, Mongrel Murphy. "This is all a pack of *** lies", he said. "Mongrel and the boys are *** artists and violence is part of our art form. These *** do-gooders can't stop us. What about *** Galileo—the *** church tried to screw him too. Why don't you *** off and do something useful". At this stage, I felt it necessary to break off the interview with Sphincter for reasons of personal safety.

Meanwhile, back at the Whirrakee shopping Mall, shop-owners adjacent to the "Satanic Rage" nightclub spent another morning removing vomit and human excrement from their doorsteps. As local proprietor Tom Hardslogg explained; "we don't mind a bit of good fun and young people will be young people. The

problem is that all the public toilets have been burnt down and I guess doorways are the next best thing". Another shop-owner, Miss Marjorie Thimble complained mildly of glass from her broken window contaminating the assorted condiments and smallgoods in her expensive "foreign cuisine" display. "At least they left the hot salami and black puddings", she said, ruefully surveying the ransacked premises.

The proprietor of the Satanic Rage was unavailable for comment when I arrived at 10,30am. Apparently he had gone to bed after banking the night's takings and ordering in 35 hogsheads of Taiwanese whisky for tonight's "All Night Chunderama Special" at the Club.

★ ★ ★ ★

March 14th

I was deeply shocked and saddened to learn of the death of Mrs Eunice Cakebread last week. Mrs Cakebread's body was discovered in the Bendigo Creek last Monday by early morning rowers practicing for the forthcoming May Swamp regatta. Reports indicate that the body had been weighed down by a large concrete gnome and a concrete rabbit of similar size. There were multiple contusions to the head and body, coronary infarctions, hematomas, hepatic inclusions and cigarette burns to the arms. Police are not ruling out foul play.

All of us at Wallaby Ridge were fond of Eunice, despite some mild competition between her and the rest of the residents in Lingernook Street. Each Easter, the Cakebread's produced a magnificent Easter Pageant in their front garden and , I must admit, this completely overshadowed the feeble attempts by other residents. The truth is that, in the matter of Easter garden pageants, Eunice left the rest of us for dead (that is, until someone left her for dead in the Bendigo Creek). Eunice's massed display of Easter Bunnies and other potent symbols of Easter such as giant eggs, were further enhanced by a magnificent lighting set up. At one stage, she had no less than fifteen aircraft searchlights illuminating her display. (I understand that her husband, Neville, purchased these at a very favourable price from the Iraqi Government, post Desert Storm).

Each Easter, hundreds of buses crammed with tourists made the pilgrimage out to Lingernook Street to experience the sense of spiritual renewal associated with the Bunny Pageant. There were a few disagreeable moments, I must confess. Some mean-spirited neighbours did complain of excess traffic and temporary blindness and, on more than one occasion, rabbit traps were found, in a fully set attitude, on the lawn area of the pageant (fortunately, many of the rabbits were positioned on the roof).

I understand that police are currently questioning a number of suspects. Amongst these is a local organiser of the Blood Sports Association. Police have linked this group to an earlier assault on the Lingernook St. rabbits. Also brought in for questioning was the Chairman of the Easter Bilby Association (EBA). The EBA specialise in urban terror and have as their aim the replacement of the Easter Bunny symbol with the Easter Bilby. A spokesperson for the group recently indicated that drastic measures might be needed to replace the rabbit, an introduced vermin species, with the more attractive, native, and endangered Bilby as the official Easter symbol. The Australian Conservation Foundation have issued a statement disassociating their organisation from the views of the EBA.

★ ★ ★ ★

April 20th

There have been jubilant scenes at the Wallaby Ridge council chambers over the past few days. In a series of meetings, the Shire Administrators have clinched a deal with the Chairman of U-Win Gaming P/L, Mr Lou "Lucky" Grasp. Under the terms of the agreement, gaming machines are to be installed in the newly named Eunice Cakebread Memorial Hall and at other selected locations. The Shire is about to launch a competition at the local school to come up with a suitable name for the new casino at Cakebread Hall. Announcing the agreement yesterday, the CEO, Basil Scrivener said that "this will move Wallaby Ridge into the 21st Century and greatly bolster the local economy".

There has been some limited opposition to the new deal. A spokesperson for the Wallaby Ridge Senior Citizens, former occupants of the Cakebread Hall, said that some members were finding it difficult to travel out to their new meeting venue at the East Bagshot Mechanics Institute. The future of the latter building is also under review by the recently constituted Public Amenities Rationalisation Committee and there are rumours that the Hall may be sold off. Some of the Wallaby Ridge Churches have also voiced concerns. Father Daniel O'Herlihy, PP of St. Agnes', said that he had been resisting pressure from "progressive elements" to install gaming machines in the narthex of the church. The local branch of the Salvation Army has also shown little enthusiasm re the "new economic miracle". A spokesperson for the S.A. has told the Wallaby Creek Office of the *Clarion* that demand for emergency supplies, particularly 20 cent coins, has been overwhelming. In a conciliatory gesture, U-Win Gaming P/L has offered to place machines in the Salvation Army Hall at a much reduced fee.

Fears of widespread social problems and poverty attending the introduction of these machines seem to be largely unfounded. A recent cost-benefit analysis of the local gaming industry by academic and noted economist, Dr. Angus Forehead,

B.Ag.Sc., PhD., indicates that the net economic gain from the Casino will be considerable. Using the Reinhart-Fourier sociological model, Dr. Forehead has predicted that the new industry will vastly enhance social cohesion and stability as well as assisting the economy in a tangible way.

★★★★

June 20th

I normally keep my wireless (they call them radios now, I believe) dial permanently taped up so that it cannot be shifted off ABC FM. I listen to Kay McClennan on a Sunday morning and, sometimes, to Marian Arnold. That young upstart, Christopher Lawrence is a bit too much. They took him away from school far too early. Anyway, the point is that by some accident, the dial got shifted the other day and the dammed machine tuned itself into one of those stations which plays barbed wire music and talk-back interviews. The talk-back subject was looking after pets and I must say, after five minutes of this, I was feeling very guilty indeed. I had not realised the complexity of nutritional issues associated with feeding your cats and dogs.

My own dogs, Peter and Paul (Fr. Dan gave them to me as pups years ago) have a pretty monotonous diet of scraps, bread and milk, pollard and fat, and the occasional boiled rabbit. Unfortunately, since old Bofors disappeared 35 years ago, I have not had another cat—it wouldn't be fair to old Bofors. Anyway, according to the vet on the wireless (I think Hughie Wirth had a few words too), dogs and cats need complex carbohydrates, proteins, long-chain fatty acids, amino acids, trace elements, essential oils and, of course, aloe vera. I hadn't realised. I felt so dammed guilty, I decided to give them a special treat. This proved a lot harder than it might sound.

On the shelves of the Wallaby Ridge Hypermart (the old corner store run by Mr Puttee Ramset Jam Singh has long since been bulldozed) there were literally hundreds of pet food brands and combinations—"Petite Dine with Tuna & Mackerel", "Snappy Tom with Jellymeat","Goodo Gourmet with Fatted Goose-liver", "Fido with Vit. K54", "Blanko with Sturgeon Roe & Quail Tongue", "Bozo with Lemur extract", "Kit-e-Kat with Southern Right Whale", "Cheapo No-name" (the old 'boiled bunny' I suspect), etc. That was just one shelf. I had not reached the dried pet-food section. In the finish, I closed my eyes and did a sort of random grocery-grab (Jam Singh never had a grocery grab—probably why he went out of business). Peter and Paul ate the lot—even the packet of Trill birdseed which I had inadvertently grabbed from the wrong shelf.

I have been thinking a lot about this since. If the average dog in Australia is like mine, what about those poor dogs and cats in places like Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, etc. where the supermarkets are few and far between. It must be mighty monotonous and quite unhealthy for dogs and cats. Well, I am a direct action man. I have just sent over a full index of petfood brands and an order form to my old friend in Rwanda, Xavier Mboko (we served together on the Somme).

[Late note, July 14: Xavier Mboko has just written back. Apparently there are no dogs or cats in his district. They ate the last one—a Rhodesian Ridgeback ex police force—on New Years Day. However, he has expressed great interest in the idea of sending a shipload of tinned petfood over. He is not particular about the brand]

★★★★

1977
Jan, 15th
Universal education has always been high on my list of priorities for Wallaby Ridge. I have always maintained that an educated population will eventually destroy the evils of class and privilege that have been with us for so long. Not that I'm a communist—I've always had doubts about old Joe Stalin. Spread the knowledge has always been a sort of catch-cry for me. You can imagine then, the sense of pride I felt when Wallaby Ridge opened its first University last month. Not before time, mind you, as most other suburbs have had one or two of them for years now.

I'm not sure how it all came about but I understand that there was a sort of upgrading of the old Wallaby Ridge Trades School following some Canberra decision called the Dawkins Plan. All a bit funny really. One day, old Bert Gullet, is teaching carpentry, the next he is lecturer in "renewable resource technology". Mind you, Bert is not complaining—he got a hefty salary rise and him and Agnes (his wife) are heading off to America on sabbatical leave in a few weeks. Apparently, former service as a trades teacher carries over to the lecturer position and Bert had about 35 years up his sleeve. Still, he must miss the sawbenches, planes and routers—its all computers and book stuff now he tells me. He does the carbon cycle, resource use pyramid, form & design, sociology of woodchipping, and stuff like that. Most of the students are "off campus" (to use old Bert's terminology) and phone in or chat to him on the internet.

Bert's Course is part of the Faculty of Ecosystems and Sustainable Resource Management. Actually, that's the only Faculty at the Wallaby Ridge Campus. It's a sort of specialist Campus. There are three hundred odd students enrolled. Global warming, habitat stratification, population regulation, indigenous biorhythms,

deep sea nutrification, biofeedback systems, ecopolitics, ecomodelling (Denholm-Fourier) and eco-chaos theory are just a few of the subjects on offer.

The Graduate Placements office at the Uni expects a heavy demand for its first crop of graduands. The Vice Chancellor, Miss Sibyl Astringent, announced yesterday that plans for graduation ceremonies for the one year basic degree course were well advanced. However, there was some doubt about an 'on campus' ceremony at the new Assembly Hall. Apparently, refurbishing of the hall (formerly the old Leather Trades Building) has been delayed because of a local shortage of carpenters and plumbers.

★ ★ ★ ★

March 4th

Wallaby Creek is in the news again! In what has been described as the world's first fully ecological interment, the body of Miss Sibyl Astringent was yesterday composted at the Wallaby Ridge State Park. In a simple but moving secular ceremony, the event facilitator, Dr. Neville Forehead, described Sibyl as "a true pioneer in macro-ecological thinking". In keeping with Sibyl's strong atheistic convictions, Dr Forehead wore a simple Australian Sceptics Association tee shirt and black trousers.

It had been Miss Astringent's express wish to be composted rather than cremated or interred in a coffin. This is not surprising given her strong opposition to increasing carbon dioxide emissions and the logging industry. As she pointed out in a written communication shortly before her death, composting is the only acceptable ecological method of interment because it facilitates nutrient recycling, so essential for the future of planet earth.

Miss Astringent's death comes after a short illness. She is believed to have suffered from the very rare Disseminated Splenic Angst Syndrome (DSAS). Although the cause of DSAS is not fully understood, the condition is believed to be potentiated by a combination of electromagnetic radiation (radiofrequency type) and passive inhalation of alcohol fumes. Researchers in the Ecotoxicology Department at Wallaby Ridge University point to the fact that both of Miss Astringent's neighbours were frequent mobile phone users and her house was immediately downwind of McGillicuddy's Rose of Ireland hotel.

The scene at the composting site—a secluded eco-niche within the Park—was generally sombre, but not emotional. In the only unseemly showing of religious superstition, one distraught mourner was seen to sprinkle Dynamic Lifter over the composting mound. Selected poems by A.C. Swinburne and Thomas Hardy (the first poet to understand recycling) were read and a few short passages from

the collected works of David Suzuki. By request, there were no exotic flowers at the event, although fully biodegradable vegetable matter from indigenous plant materials was permitted.

In a very generous gesture, Miss Astringent has donated her valuable collection of Art Deco ashtrays to the National Museum. There are unconfirmed reports that, prior to her death, Miss Astringent was offered a large sum for the collection by Dame Edna Everidge. Executors of her Will have announced that her equally valuable collection of designer cigarette lighters (mainly Gucci and Ken Done) will shortly be auctioned by Sotheby's.

She will be sadly missed.