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LORD NORTHBOURNE

(Walter James)
(1896-1992)

Mediating God and the World



The Reality is eternal and wholly present everywhere; all that appears to be other than It is forgetfulness of It. We have but to remember what we are, here and now.¹

Walter Edward Christopher James, the fourth Baron Northbourne was a farmer, painter, Olympic rower, ecologist, author, translator, man of faith, perennialist. He may have been the first person to use the term ‘organic farming’, which he denied though he was certainly the one who gave it popular currency.² For Northbourne, such farming entailed not only the application of non-industrial techniques and the disavowal of poisons and pollutants but, more importantly, a *spiritual* relationship between human beings and the whole natural order, most particularly the land itself. As one reviewer of *Of the Land & the Spirit* (2008), the posthumous compilation edited by his son Christopher James and Joseph Fitzgerald, nicely stated,

Lord Northbourne was the philosopher of the organic movement’s early years. He believed that care for the earth is a spiritual discipline and that our world’s bounty and beauty are

best preserved through fidelity to religious tradition... his writings amply demonstrate the artistic sensitivity and lucid rejection of secularism which were the hallmarks of his thought. It provides a most welcome opportunity for a new generation to discover the ideas of an uncompromising cultural prophet.³

Despite the fact that Northbourne's work has been warmly commended by figures as renowned as Thomas Merton, E.F. Schumacher and Wendell Berry, unhappily it still remains too little known. This is all the more distressing insofar Northbourne had a distinctive and in many ways unique contribution to make to the perennialist school. *Of the Land & the Spirit* has gone some way to remedying the situation.

Walter James was born into in a long line of land-owners known for their public service in Parliament (as Conservatives, Liberals and cross-benchers), local government, sport and the arts. James grew up in London but spent much time during his boyhood on 'Betteshanger', the family estate in Kent, and on the moors of Northumberland where the family also had land-holdings. He was educated at Eton, served with distinction in WWI which left him with a horror of modern warfare, studied agriculture at Oxford, became a champion rower and was in the silver-medal winning crew at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp. Soon after, he and a friend purchased a small farm near Oxford before Walter moved to the family estate near Dover. In 1924 he married American Katherine Nickerson and eventually fathered five children, the eldest being Christopher, later to succeed him to the peerage to which Walter succeeded his own father in 1932.

In his early days as a farmer Northbourne was influenced by the ideas of Rudolf Steiner and Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. In 1939, at the family farm in Kent, he hosted the first conference in Britain on biodynamic farming, attended by proponents from Britain and several European countries. Northbourne described the last day of the Conference thus:

The last Saturday afternoon and evening were occupied by a large party at The Home Farm for members and all farm and estate workers and their families, in all some 200 souls. Sports and games, tea, a play given in the barn by the boys of Betteshanger school, supper and dancing provided a gay and

harmonious conclusion to what must remain, at least to most of those who were present, a very memorable week.

Under the shadows of the approaching war, he wrote of

the spirit of friendliness, happiness and unity which prevailed. That was a striking and perhaps not the least important feature of the school. It is true to say that for nine days the possibility of war was scarcely alluded to; things more real and more constructive absorbed attention.⁴

For the remainder of his life Lord Northbourne was highly active in promoting organic farming, as well as rendering public service in several other capacities. He was the first President of the Economic Reform Club which addressed itself to such problems as the causes of war and poverty, monetary reform, and food production, and was the long-serving (1946-1965) Chairman of Wye College, an agricultural college affiliated with London University. Along with discharging his many public duties he diligently cared for his family and for the land of which he was the custodian. His lifelong pastimes included painting and gardening. One of his most beautiful essays was 'Flowers' of which Wendell Berry has said, 'It has the authority and exuberance of exact knowledge and of long and ardent thought. It is a splendid essay, a masterwork, and it is exemplary'.⁵ No one but Northbourne could have written it. Right up to the time of his death he was lovingly caring for his garden – in both a physical and spiritual sense. Of flowers he had written,

the evanescence of flowers is not a matter for regret. It is an ever-present reminder of what we are; their recurrence is at the same time a guarantee of the immutability of the qualities that so delight us in them.

Developing this theme in the same essay he wrote,

Existence is joined to eternity not only through the qualities manifested in it, but also through its rhythms, which, as it were, compensate the devouring character of time. We can sense this directly when the repeated and identical vibrations of a string produce a single musical note. Through flowers as through music we can learn to hear something of the 'music of the spheres', wherein the rhythms of the whole creation are unified in one great song of praise.⁶

As well as providing us with a model of a life well lived Northbourne left a rich legacy as a writer and translator. From

his earliest years he was a person with a deeply spiritual sensibility but his thinking was given a more metaphysical orientation and a distinctive perennialist stamp after his introduction to the principles espoused by the great traditionalists to whose writings he was introduced by Marco Pallis through whom he also came to strike up a rich correspondence with Father Thomas Merton. Amongst Lord Northbourne's many achievements were his elegant translations of major works by Schuon and Burckhardt, as well as Guénon's towering landmark, *The Reign of Quantity* (1945). Northbourne was a frequent contributor to *Studies in Comparative Religion* and the author of three books: *Look to the Land* (1940), *Religion in the Modern World* (1963) and *Looking Back on Progress* (1970).

Look to the Land was written before Lord Northbourne's introduction to the writings of Guénon et al. Its governing theme is 'the farm as organism' which he opposed to chemically-based industrial farming:

In the long run, the results of attempting to substitute chemical farming for organic farming will very probably prove far more deleterious than has yet become clear. And it is perhaps worth pointing out that the artificial manure industry is very large and well organized. Its propaganda is subtle, and artificials will die hard.⁷

With these insights he was well ahead of the pack. In later writings he repeatedly returned to one of his abiding themes, reminiscent of the visionary philosophy of William Blake:

The world with its inhabitants is multiple, but by virtue of its origin in the divine Unity it constitutes a unity. Whatever may affect one part affects the whole, and whatever effects the whole affects every part.⁸

– a principle with myriad applications whether we are talking of particular agricultural practices or the fate of the whole world!

Religion in the Modern World is an immediately intelligible introduction to the traditional outlook and provides a very useful explanation of what the term 'religion' properly comprises. Elsewhere the author also poses a question which is so rarely addressed by the nay-sayers:

If the confusion, fear and discontent of our times seem to be reaching towards an extreme, despite a technological development bringing a wealth and a luxury unparalleled in history, why is an exactly coincident decay of religion scarcely ever suggested as a causal factor?⁹

Of *Religion in the Modern World* Thomas Merton wrote, in a letter to its author, 'I am grateful for your important and thoughtful book, and I am sure you can see I am in the deepest possible sympathy with it'.¹⁰

Looking Back on Progress was a later collection covering Northbourne's wide-ranging interests with essays not only on agriculture but on modern science (including a stringent and unfashionable critique of evolutionism), predestination and free will, the pseudo-mythology of 'Progress', old age and flowers. In his Introduction Northbourne provides us with a key to modern ideas about 'Progress':

Progress achieved towards the satisfaction of terrestrial needs, desires, and fancies contributes nothing by itself towards inward freedom; on the contrary, when pursued beyond what is necessary, it tends more and more to supplant and to suppress the need for inward freedom, thereby defeating its own ends. Yet is its precisely such a progress that has become almost the sole aim of contemporary humanity.¹¹

He poses the question as to why the *working principle* of the 'doctrine' of Progress – 'the satisfaction of terrestrial needs' – is so little questioned in the contemporary world, and why we so rarely wonder 'whether traditional civilizations may after all have possessed something we have lost, something that made life worth living even under conditions of poverty and hardship'.¹²

Considering the matter from a more elevated metaphysical vantage-point Northbourne concludes the book with a passage that resonates with the Wisdom of the Ages, echoing the sages of yore:

Only if we look upon the universe as a partial refraction of all-possibility, and not as if it were itself identified with all-possibility, can we see 'God in all things', and that all things subsist only 'in God' and not in themselves; and at the same time that all things, to the extent that their appearance is taken for reality, play the part of so many veils hiding the Presence of Him with whom all things are possible.¹³

Now we also have *Of the Land & the Spirit: the Essential Lord Northbourne on Ecology & Religion* which includes not only many previously unpublished essays but also commentaries on his life and work by Wendell Berry, Joseph Fitzgerald and Christopher James as well as fascinating excerpts from his correspondence with Father Merton and his deeply moving, posthumously published bequest to his family, *The Ineluctable Alternative: A Letter to My Descendants* (written circa 1980). Lord Northbourne had a gift for expressing the deepest truths in the most lucid and direct prose, making his books excellent starting points for unversed readers. It was no accident that the editors of *The Underlying Religion* chose three of his essays to open an anthology intended as 'an accessible introduction' to perennialism.¹⁴ In my own teaching I frequently advised students coming to the field for the first time to start with Northbourne's *Religion in the Modern World*.

Joseph Fitzgerald has usefully foregrounded five concerns which shaped Northbourne's life and work:¹⁵ the urgent need for *ecologically aware agricultural practices*; then *the reaffirmation of the forms and values of Tradition* in the face of a modern outlook which, we recall, Northbourne so acutely characterized as 'anti-traditional, progressivist, humanist, rationalist, materialist, experimental, individualist, egalitarian, free-thinking and intensely sentimental';¹⁶ the *elucidation of metaphysical principles*, most often as they are expressed in the Christian tradition to which he cleaved; *the contrast between traditional and modern art and symbolism*, a subject to which Northbourne brought not only his understanding of the *sophia perennis* but his direct experience as a painter and gardener; and finally the application of his hard-earned wisdom to the *common problems and perplexities of the human condition* (the coming of old age for instance), perhaps most poignantly expressed in *The Ineluctable Alternative*.

In some ways Wendell Berry, the American farmer, poet, essayist, conservationist and philosopher, seems like one of Northbourne's natural heirs. It was altogether appropriate that he should write the Foreword to *Of the Land & the Spirit* in the course of which he said the following, focusing on Northbourne's most distinctive contribution:

As a critic of agriculture, Lord Northbourne's qualifications went beyond what we think of as intelligence and education. He was intelligent and educated, of course, but he was also experienced, observant, and passionately affectionate toward the land and the farmers. It is affection, I think, that sets him apart from the 'objective' proponents of industrialization... And it is affection that undoubtedly gives to his criticism its indispensable breadth... Agriculture partakes of the wholeness of life, which it inescapably must either preserve or destroy. In confronting industrial agriculture, he saw that he was confronting a 'sickness' that was at once spiritual, economic and biological... As a critic of agriculture, he aimed at wholeness of vision, and nobody has come closer to achieving it.¹⁷

True words indeed but Northbourne deserves to also be remembered for his personal qualities and for his contributions to perennialist philosophy on a broad front. Here are some reminiscences from one who knew Northbourne through his work at Wye College:

...we listened spellbound to his wise and so carefully considered addresses... it is more for his skills and his deep and lasting interests in so varying and widely ranging fields that he will be remembered with such affection... He was a man of great vision, decisiveness, quiet humour and kindly authority... one who brought to every facet of his widely ranging life a rare sense of harmony and balanced purpose. Above all he was a widely read man of very considerable scholarship with deep philosophical understanding... He belonged essentially to himself though sharing with his intimate friends his search for truth. He was a man of great faith and rare belief who saw 'through a glass darkly' so much more than is given to most of us to see and experience.¹⁸

In Lord Northbourne's final bequest to his family, 'The Ineluctable Alternative', we find these words which convey a timeless message:

Man's true worth does not reside in his temporal achievements, nor in his accumulation of material wealth or of a factual knowledge that is mainly quantitative and impossible to unify, nor in his ingenuity, nor in a purely aesthetic culture, nor in all these things put together. *Man's true worth lies in the effectiveness of his mediatorship between God and the world.*¹⁹

In cultivating God's word in his heart Northbourne was a man who kept his hand on the plough and did not look back.

Recommended Reading

All of Lord Northbourne's most significant writings can be found in three volumes: *Religion in the Modern World*, *Looking Back on Progress* and the posthumous anthology *Of the Land & the Spirit* (ed. Christopher James and Joseph Fitzgerald), this last also including much valuable biographical material, excerpts from his correspondence with Thomas Merton, and the previously unpublished 'The Ineluctable Alternative'.

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- ¹ Lord Northbourne, *Looking Back on Progress*, 41. The 1950 photo of Northbourne is by Walter Stoneman; National Portrait Gallery.
 - ² See John Paull, 'Lord Northbourne, the man who invented organic farming, a biography', *Journal of Organic Systems* (Tasmania), 9.1, 2014, 31-53.
 - ³ Philip Cornford, back cover of Lord Northbourne, *Of the Land & the Spirit*. Cornford, author of *The Origins of the Organic Movement*, reviewed the book in *Rural History* (Cambridge), 22,1, April 2010, 139-140.
 - ⁴ Northbourne quoted in John Paull, 'The Betteshanger Summer School: Missing Link Between Biodynamic and Organic Farming', *Journal of Organic Systems*, 6.2, 2011, 13-26.
 - ⁵ Wendell Berry in Foreword to *Of the Land & the Spirit*, xii.
 - ⁶ Lord Northbourne, *Looking Back on Progress*, 105 & 106.
 - ⁷ From Lord Northbourne, *Look to the Land*, quoted in John Paull, 'The Farm as Organism: The Foundational Idea of Organic Agriculture', *Journal of Biodynamics* (Tasmania) 80, 2006, 14.
 - ⁸ *Looking Back on Progress*, 87.
 - ⁹ 'Walter James, 4th Baron Northbourne', *Wikiquote*, from 'Intellectual Freedom', *Studies in Comparative Religion*, V.i, Winter 1971.
 - ¹⁰ *Of the Land and the Spirit*, back cover.
 - ¹¹ Lord Northbourne, 'Introductory', *Looking Back on Progress*, 9.
 - ¹² Lord Northbourne, 'Introductory', *Looking Back on Progress*, 13.
 - ¹³ Lord Northbourne, *Looking Back on Progress*, 122.
 - ¹⁴ M. Lings and C. Minnaar (eds), *The Underlying Tradition*, 2007, xi.
 - ¹⁵ See J. Fitzgerald, Preface to *Of the Land & the Spirit*, xiii-xvi.
 - ¹⁶ Quoted by Gai Eaton as an epitaph in *Tomorrow* XII.iii, 1964, 191.
 - ¹⁷ W. Berry, Foreword, *Of the Land & the Spirit*, vii-viii.
 - ¹⁸ From D. Skilbeck, 'Lord Northbourne', *Wye: The Journal of the Agricola Club and Swanley Guild*, 12.1, 1983, 78-79, quoted in John Paull, 'Lord Northbourne, the man who invented organic farming, a biography', 45.
 - ¹⁹ 'The Ineluctable Alternative: A Letter to My Descendants', *Of the Land & the Spirit*, 210.

