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TEMPHOS
Number Five

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To the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for permission to reproduce the portrait of Kabir (from a manuscript). (page 6)

To the Victoria and Albert Museum for the portrait of Shah Jahan, and the bronze of Siva Nataraja. (page 70)
Kabir was a weaver by trade, and is here shown at his loom.
Yeats and Kabir*

KATHLEEN RAINÉ

Of all modern Western poets writing in English the one to have been most deeply and continuously influenced by India is William Butler Yeats. As an art-student in Dublin Yeats and his friend the poet and mystic George Russell (AE) were among the founders of the Dublin Hermetic Society, in the year 1885, under the auspices of the Theosophical Society in London. In however confused a form, the Theosophical Society did bring the metaphysical thought of India, hitherto little known beyond a circle of scholars, within reach of many dissatisfied alike with institutional religion and the no less naïve rationalism of that time. A hundred years earlier, under the distinguished patronage of Sir William Jones, the Calcutta Society of Bengal had published annually its Proceedings; which contained many translations of Indian texts, including the Laws of Manu, some of the Vedic Hymns and other learned contributions. The Bhagavad Geeta, translated by Charles Wilkins (under the auspices of Warren Hastings), was known to Blake, and 'The Bramins – A drawing' is the title of one of Blake's paintings, now lost; 'The subject is, Mr. Wilkin translating the Geeta'. Blake's friend the sculptor Flaxman designed the memorial of Sir William Jones, in which he represented Jones being instructed by Brahmins. But although Jones himself pointed out the similarities between Indian philosophic thought and that of the eighteenth-century Immaterialist philosopher Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne in Ireland, the time for the understanding of such thought (whether that of India, or of Berkeley himself, whose roots were in the Platonic tradition) had not come. The tide of experimental science was in full flow and such dissidents as William Blake and his one-time friend Thomas Taylor the Platonist went unheeded.

With the advent, at the end of the century, of the Theosophical Society, the tide began to turn, and what Yeats has described as 'the rise

* Paper read at the inaugural meeting of the Yeats Society of India, Delhi 1983.
of soul against intellect' began to make its first inroads into the entrenched positions of naïve materialism. There were by now translations available of many of the Indian scriptures; and although H. P. Blavatsky and her circle were not scholars (though with some distinguished exceptions, like G. R. S. Mead, translator of the Hermetica and other Gnostic texts) yet they played a significant part in the reversal of the premisses of (again to use Yeats's phrase) the 'three provincial centuries' of Western materialism. The publications of the Society itself, and those of John M. Watkins, included many texts long unobtainable (such as Thomas Taylor's translations of the Neoplatonists) and were throughout of a high quality.

There were other stirrings at the end of the nineteenth century of the same rejection of the new pseudo-religion of positivist science. These included the beginnings of the new psychology of the Unconscious, under the influence of Freud, and later of his younger and greater contemporary C. G. Jung; the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research, and the classical work in that field by Myers and Conan Doyle in England, Flammarión and his circle in France and Lombroso in Italy. There was besides Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical movement in Germany, and those now famous Cabbalistic and Rosicrucian groups in France and England, in which Yeats himself played so active a part. The magical Order of the Golden Dawn was grounded in the Western Esoteric Tradition centred about Christian Cabala, and included also Rosicrucian and Alchemical elements; a tradition of knowledge which, because founded in the belief that mind and not matter is the ground of reality, had been virtually excluded from what the materialist ideologies were prepared to regard as 'knowledge' at all.

Yeats saw, proclaimed, and helped to bring about, the beginnings of a reversal of premisses of which we are today well aware; the Newtonian, post-Cartesian model of the universe is obsolete and science itself prepared to admit mind as a factor which cannot be excluded from its own findings. Yeats studied more deeply than his Academic critics have been willing to allow or are perhaps aware, the various currents of thought grounded in the premiss that mind, or spirit, is the source and matter but the lowest effect in a chain of causes originating in living Godhead. A student in turn of theosophy and Cabala, of Swedenborg and Blake, of folklore and psychical research,
of the Neoplatonists and the Nō Theatre (that stage on which incarnate and discarnate spirits meet in dramatic encounter) he turned finally and definitively at last to the venerable root of all immaterialist thought, the Vedas. With his teacher Sri Purohit Swami he made translations of the six principal Upanishads. After Purohit Swami's return to India, Yeats sought the acquaintance of Dr Shastri who had founded in London his Shanti Sadan, a centre of Hindu teaching, worship and study, which still continues. Dr Shastri was himself responsible for many admirable translations of Shankara and other Indian scriptures and poetry. Yeats never in fact became a member of Shanti Sadan because his failing health at that time made it necessary for him to reside abroad. But I was told by his friend of later life, Captain Dermott MacManus (a fellow-student with Sri Purohit Swami, and author of books on the supernatural lore of Ireland) that when Yeats at last made his full discovery of the tradition of Indian thought, he no longer concerned himself with spiritualism, mediumship, magic, or any of his former interests in such secondary matters: he had reached what was, for him, the goal of his journey.

Dermott MacManus had as a young man been a captain in the British Army and stationed in India. He had wholeheartedly fallen in love with India; and had, after being for many years refused, been granted initiation in a Shiva temple. He wrote a novel (unpublished) grounded in this experience, which remained to the end the central experience of his life. Perhaps for reasons not unlike Yeats's own (which were, as we shall see, related to the unity of the Indian view of life, of body soul and spirit as indivisibly one) he was later to resume his Indian allegiance as a student of Purohit Swami. It seems likely therefore that Yeats's Indian studies were coloured by the Shiva cult of the sacredness of sexuality.

At the time when Yeats and AE were fellow-students in Dublin, Mohini Chatterjee, an Indian theosophist, was sent from the London head-quarters of the Theosophical Society and his influence on both poets was to prove enduring, though in different ways. AE, more mystic than poet, was to remain a Theosophist in permanent commitment; Yeats took another direction in his commitment to the Order of the Golden
Dawn and the Western esoteric tradition. Yet half a lifetime later – in 1928 – Yeats was in his poem ‘Mohini Chatterjee’ to recall the lessons he had learned from that first teacher, and above all the doctrine of rebirth; a belief he retained, claiming besides to find traces of this ancient tradition in Irish folklore.

Yeats’s early collection Crossways (dedicated to AE, the friend with whom he was at the time the poems were written so closely associated in Theosophical studies) includes three poems on Indian themes. Of these ‘The Indian to his Love’ is a simple charming poem whose Indian setting is purely decorative:

The peahens dance on a smooth lawn
A parrot sways upon a tree,
Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea.

‘The Indian upon God’ is a much better poem and does show some understanding of Indian thought, telling as it does of the divine immanence in all creatures. The scene of the third, a brief poetic drama ‘Anashuya and Vijana’ is ‘A little Indian temple in the Golden Age. Around it a garden; around that the forest. Anashuya, the young priestess, kneeling within the temple.’ It breathes the Arcadian atmosphere of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala of which there was more than one translation available, including Sir William Jones’s, several times reprinted during the 19th century. The temple-setting is that of Shakuntala and the name Anashuya that of one of Shakuntala’s attendants. But this ‘India’, while providing evidence of Yeats’s having fallen under the spell of the India of poetry, is little more than a charming setting for a young man’s love.

For various reasons, including his own uncertainty as to his path, and H. P. Blavatsky’s disapproval of his experimental interest in psychic phenomena and magical studies, Yeats turned away from the Eastern-oriented world of the Theosophical Society to the Western esoteric tradition as taught by MacGregor Mathers’s Order of the Golden Dawn. This course he seriously followed for many years. At the same time – and perhaps for related reasons – the obligation to make use of the tradition we inherit – he made the deliberate decision to dedicate his poetic talent to his own country, Ireland. In an essay on ‘Ireland and the Arts’ Yeats recalls the attraction of eclecticism to poets.
without any decided impulse to one thing more than another, and especially to those who are convinced, as I was convinced, that art is tribeless, nationless, a blossom gathered in No Man’s Land.

In a letter written soon after (in 1886) he speaks of having reached a decision which he was to maintain to the end of his life:

When I first wrote I went here and there for my subjects as my reading led me, and preferred to all other countries Arcadia and the India of romance, but presently I convinced myself for such reasons as those in ‘Ireland and the Arts’, that I should never go for the scenery of a poem to any country but my own, and I think I shall hold that conviction to the end.

– as he did; for, he wrote,

I would have Ireland recreate the ancient arts, the arts as they were understood in Judaea, in India, in Scandinavia, in Greece and Rome, in every ancient land; as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business.

The measure is to be Tradition – sacred tradition as now still understood perhaps only in India today.

But in Yeats’s resolution there is an implicit reservation: he wrote ‘the scenery of a poem’; and when India returned to his work it was no longer pea-hens and temples of the Golden Age but the metaphysical teaching of sacred tradition that rose like a tide and filled his poems; the scenery – the images – are those of his native Ireland, or those common to the whole of Europe; the spiritual knowledge was, increasingly, to be that of India.

* * *

It is of course impossible to give a precise date to Yeats’s turning again towards India; for something had remained from his theosophical days. Nor was anything like a change of mind in question – on the contrary, his studies in other traditions – the Cabbala, Neoplatonism and the rest – were (to use Coomaraswamy’s image) of other dialects within the same universal language of spiritual knowledge. But a significant turning-point may well have been Yeats’s reading of Kabir.
I happened by a fortunate chance to have put into my hands, during a visit to the United States, a little collection of ‘versions’ by Robert Bly of poems by Kabir. In one of these was the image of the chestnut tree developed in terms so closely resembling Yeats’s image in ‘Among Schoolchildren’ that it seemed evident beyond all doubt that here was Yeats’s source. Robert Bly had made his versions from Rabindranath Tagore’s and Evelyn Underhill’s One Hundred Poems of Kabir, published in 1915, a book of which there are two copies in Yeats’s library. Robert Bly confessed that ‘chestnut-tree’ was his own addition. (Tagore does not in this poem name the tree but elsewhere writes of the Banyan.) Perhaps he too had, consciously or otherwise, discerned the similarity of Yeats’s poem and Kabir’s. I hastened to look up Tagore’s original translation, and there can be little doubt that this was a book Yeats had read, for in it are several important similarities with other poems besides ‘Among Schoolchildren’.

The first unmistakable allusion to Kabir is in ‘Wild Swans at Coole’, published by the Cuala Press, 1916, just a year after the publication of One Hundred Poems of Kabir. Kabir had written:

Tell me, O Swan, your ancient tale.
From what land do you come, O Swan?
Where would you take your rest, O Swan, and what do you seek?

(xii)

The swan, world-wide emblem of the soul, is a migrant from world to world; and this doctrine underlies Yeats’s lines also:

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful:
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake’s edge or pool
Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

Yeats had implied the immortality of the swans in the previous lines:

Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

And may we not say that the answer to Yeats’s rhetorical question with which he ends the poem is answered by Kabir:
Even this morning, O Swan, arise, follow me!
There is a land where no doubt nor sorrow have rule: where the
terror of death is no more.
There the woods of spring are a-bloom, and the fragrant ‘He is I’
is borne on the wind:
There the bee of the heart is deeply immersed, and desires no
other joy. (xii)

This background to Yeats’s poem – for such I believe it to be – suggests a richness of meaning, certainly implicit in Yeats’s vision of the swans at Coole, which raises the poem from the level of personal sentiment into a metaphysical statement. He had long ago deliberately renounced all exotic imagery (from ‘Arcadia’ or from ‘The Ancient India of Romance’) and it would have been in keeping with his practice to transpose Kabir into terms of Irish landscape and symbolism which conforms completely with the images he found in his own country.

At the end of his life he was surely remembering another of Kabir’s poems when he wrote the lines now inscribed on his tombstone:

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Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horsem an, pass by.
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Again it must be said that no poem written by a poet so richly possessed of the learning of the imagination as was Yeats can be assigned to one single source. But Kabir had written:

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Look upon life and death: there is no separation between them.
The right hand and the left hand are the same. (xvii)
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The poem was after all written during the last phase of Yeats’s life in which he had returned to Indian studies, to that mystical and metaphysical tradition in which he had found in its wholeness what he had found only in incomplete form in the West. In the light of this background, have not these lines that to the secular reader might seem bitter, for Yeats, initiate of the perennial wisdom, another sense altogether, that of unity and harmony? This tranquil view of death is altogether in keeping also with his view of the history of the discarnate soul, long studied, and recorded in A Vision.
The image of the Tree of God is, of course, central to the Cabbala which Yeats had long studied, and in suggesting that the chestnut tree of 'Among Schoolchildren' reflects Yeats's reading of Kabir I would not wish to suggest that an image of the Tree of Life – so universal, and rooted in the Garden of Eden itself – had been hitherto unknown to the poet: on the contrary, it was a symbol long pondered. In The Trembling of the Veil he had written of the Cabbalistic Tree:

The Tree of Life is a geometrical figure made up of ten circles or spheres called Sephiroth joined by straight lines. Once men must have thought of it as like some great tree covered with its fruit and foliage, but at some period, in the thirteenth century, perhaps, touched by the mathematical genius of Arabia in all likelihood, it had lost its natural form.

In 'The Two Trees' Yeats has given back to the geometrical Tree its living Edenic form. The poem was doubtless addressed to Maud Gonne, herself a fellow-student of Cabbala to whom the reading of the symbol would have presented no difficulty:

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;
From joy the holy branches start,
And all the trembling flowers they bear.
The changing colours of its fruit
Have dowered the stars with merry light;
The surety of its hidden root
Has planted quiet in the night.

It may be that the 'changing colours' of the fruit refers to the different colours by which the sephiroth are represented; which are also the planets (the 'stars' in common astrological parlance).

In his play The Green Helmet, Yeats had used the Tree as a symbol of the unity of being of man himself; for the paradigm of the Tree of God is repeated in every created being, its application is multiple:

Though leaves are many, the root is one
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun,
Now I may wither into Truth.

In 'Among Schoolchildren' the image of the tree is most fully and
splendidly developed. The occasion of 'Among Schoolchildren' is a visit Yeats, 'A sixty-year-old smiling public man', pays to a convent school for girls. He thinks of his old love – Maud Gonne – as she must have been as a child; and of his own youth. Now they are both old:

Her present image floats into my mind –
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?

The mention of 'Plato's parable' in the second stanza, introduces the myth of Leda, mother of Helen of Troy, to whom he had long ago compared Maud Gonne, not only in respect of her beauty but because she, like Helen, had been one through whom blazed the events of history:

Was there another Troy for her to burn?

Dublin was Maud Gonne's Troy, whose Troubles had by now had as outcome the Republic of Ireland of which Yeats, once a young revolutionary, is now himself a senator. From Leda's other egg Castor and Pollux had hatched; and Yeats, himself an astrologer and born under the sign of the Twins, considers Maud Gonne and himself as born into history out of the same egg, 'the yolk and white of the one shell', their fates and their lives united from before birth. Theirs is the intimacy of Isis and Osiris in the womb, love's closest conceivable union here suggested.

'Among Schoolchildren' moves from a consideration of generation into a time-world (which the poet considers in terms of the Neoplatonic tradition especially) to the paradox which has troubled humankind since the Epic of Gilgamesh, how to reconcile the soul's immortal nature with the mortality of the body that moves from birth to death so inexorably. It is essential, always, to read Yeats's poetry against the background not of current positivist humanist ideologies but of the philosophia perennis, for which the soul is a deathless being and an eternal spiritual world soul's native country. Plotinus on 'The Soul's Descent into Body' (Ennead IV.8) well describes this knowledge which underlies Yeats's poem; mythologized by Porphyry in his De Antro nympharum (On the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs) to which Yeats alludes in the fifth stanza. Without this
paradox of mortal self and immortal soul the profound inner tension of the poem could not exist; for it is no mere lament over mortality but a wrestling with far deeper questions.

First of these is generation itself, introduced in the symbol of the egg of Leda, and elaborated later in allusions to Porphyry and to Plato. 'Leda and the Swan' appears in Yeats's Collected Poems on the page before 'Among Schoolchildren', and the symbol of the egg (one he was later to elaborate in A Vision) is there presented with great power. Both Orphic and Indian cosmology, and also Blake, speak of the world-egg, the world as a womb into which generating souls 'descend' from a discarnate eternal state. Whence do the souls come? Why do they come? Who sends them on their journey and for what purpose? In 'Leda and the Swan' the paradox of divine and carnal begetting is united in the image of Zeus himself in the guise of a swan ('the brute blood of the air') and Yeats asks what the girl — Leda — can know of the event of which she is the agent, or its historic import.

Once generated the heaven-born soul must pass through the time-world, become the 'sixty-year-old smiling public man' and the hollow-cheeked image of those aged women Leonardo depicted with such cold skill. Yeats felt much bitterness about old age, a bitterness present in many of his poems and passionately evoked in the contrast between the thought of Maud Gonne as a child and 'her present image':

And thereupon my heart is driven wild.
She stood before me as a living child.

What he felt can be assumed; but that feeling is but the starting point for a search for meaning in the journey of what Blake calls 'the worm of sixty winters' from cradle to grave. His theme is not the facile humanist lament over mortality. If man were not infinite as well as finite, there could be no such tension as that which informs this poem and many others in Yeats's work. What is the meaning of the passage from Leda's egg to 'a comfortable kind of old scarecrow', his image of old age; and we think of those other passionate lines, from Sailing to Byzantium:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress.
In that poem he goes to learn of the Sages of Byzantium; here he will question the Greek philosophers.

* * *

The Neoplatonic background of the poem is established in the fifth stanza by his allusion to Porphyry:

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation had betrayed,
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide,
Would think her son, could she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on his head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth.

If the reference to Porphyry and to the Platonic doctrine of the descent of souls into generation is understood this stanza is of perfect clarity. According to Plato himself (Republic X) souls about to enter generation must cross the River Lethe and there drink the forgetful draught of hyle (matter) before their arrival in the world of generation. They are warned not to drink too deeply of the draught of matter because those who do so will forget eternity; whereas those who drink less deeply are able to recollect their anterior state. Those ‘drugged’ with matter are what the Neoplatonist writers, and also Blake, call ‘sleepers’; and those who recollect the eternal world ‘shriek, struggle to escape’ when they find themselves bound into a mortal body. This theme of the draught of hyle (matter) is recounted in a variant mythological form by Porphyry, who adds the detail that ‘honey’ is the sweet lure of sexuality through which the process of generation is set in motion. There may be a glance towards Wordsworth’s lines about the generating soul ‘trailing clouds of glory’ as it comes from God into this world where that vision will ‘fade into the light of common day’ – itself a Neoplatonic echo.

The studies of poets are often far other than those of their Academic commentators. In Yeats’s library there is a copy of Lombroso’s ‘After Death – What?’ in which an account is given of a remarkable session with the medium Eusapia Palladino – one of the few ‘materializations’ recorded of this medium. The mother of one of the learned sitters is
said to have ‘held a regular conversation with him by gestures, pointing sorrowfully to his spectacles and his semi-baldness as if she would make him understand how long a time had elapsed since she had left him a bold and beautiful youth.’

Yeats then philosophizes: is Plato’s answer the true one, that only the eternal world, of which nature and the time-world is but a mutable image, is real? Or that of ‘soldier Aristotle’, whose pupil was the world-conqueror Alexander, and whose philosophy opened the way to Western materialism? Or that of Pythagoras, who had discerned the great universal harmony?

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
Soldier Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless muses heard:
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

Pythagoras’ golden thigh, which he showed to Abaris, a priest of the Hyperborean temple of Apollo, was taken to indicate that he was the God himself, or his avatar. The naming of Abaris establishes a link with Ireland, with ‘that ancient sect’ – the Pythagoreans – mentioned in a later poem, ‘The Statues’; while the lines that follow refer to Pythagoras’ gift of listening to the music of the spheres (‘what a star sang’).

Yeats habitually embodied profound thought or recondite allusion in the airy-light vesture of images. At a first reading we may enjoy such images without full understanding; but examination will show them to be firmly and accurately established in the sources from which the poet had himself gained his knowledge; he had his share of ‘blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil’ but it is a poet’s task to embody his metaphysics in symbolic images, in ‘a little song about a rose’, as Yeats himself wrote. But the ‘hard symbolic bones’ are never absent. He had evidently read in Iamblichus’ *Life of Pythagoras* this passage:

... employing a certain ineffable divinity, and which it is difficult to apprehend, he extended his ears, and fixed his intellect in the sublime symphonies of the world, he alone hearing and understanding, as it appears, the universal harmony and concordance of
the spheres, and the stars that are moved through them, and which produce a fuller and more intense melody than anything affected by mortal sounds.* This melody also was the result of dissimilar and variously differing sounds, celerities, magnitudes and intervals, arranged with reference to each other in a certain musical ratio, and thus producing a most gentle, and at the same time variously beautiful motion and convolution.

Taylor (whose translation of Iamblichus Yeats as well as Blake would have read) favoured a rational explanation of that music – that Pythagoras did not really ‘hear’ sounds but apprehended a mathematical harmony. But in Pythagoras’ teaching music was central; and the music of the Pythagorean rituals was a transcription of the heavenly harmonies.

Being therefore irrigated as it were with this melody, having the reason of his intellect well arranged through it, and as I may say exercised, he determined to exhibit certain images of these things to his disciples as much as possible, especially producing an imitation of them through instruments, and through the mere voice alone. For he conceived that by him alone, of all the inhabitants of the earth, the mundane sounds were understood and heard, and this from a natural fountain and root. . . . But he apprehended that other men ought to be satisfied in looking to him, and the gifts he possessed, and in being benefited and corrected through images and examples, in consequence of their inability to comprehend truly the first and genuine archetypes of things. (Ch. XII)

Pythagoras had temples built to all the Muses; whom Yeats here calls ‘careless’ perhaps in an ambiguous sense, as signifying that they had no sorrows, as humanity has, and also that they only carelessly and inadequately recorded the celestial harmonies in their ‘imitation through instruments’; a poor second-best. The ‘fiddle-stick or strings’ refers of course to Pythagoras’ discovery of the numerical harmonics of the diatonic scale. The ‘fiddle-stick’ is the monocord on which he ‘fingered’ these harmonic intervals; and the ‘strings’ tuned to give sounds in the same harmonic scale, the lyre, associated with Apollo and signifying the numerical harmony of the universe.

* There is an age-old form of Yoga, taught in India to this day, which consists in listening to the ‘sound’ of the Universe, which is (literally) heard by the inner senses; ‘not to the sensual ear, but to the spirit . . .’
Why then is Pythagoras himself rejected by Yeats along with too abstract Plato and too concrete Aristotle as just another scarecrow? It would seem because all three make a separation between the mortal life of the body, and the life of the immortal soul. Pythagoras taught his disciples to scorn whatever has to do with the body and to discipline themselves continually in an asceticism alike of body and of laborious intellectual studies. Yeats had long ago learned from Blake that ‘Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call’d Body is a portion of Soul discern’d by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.’ (Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Pl.iv.K.149.) Blake doubtless included the ‘sacred code’ of Pythagoras and the Platonists in his condemnation of all ‘Bibles and sacred codes’ responsible for the error ‘That Man has two real existing principles: Viz: a Body & a Soul.’ (ibid). Yeats too was looking for a principle of the unity of all things and failed to find it in any of the Greek philosophers here dismissed.

In the seventh stanza the Christian teaching is also, by implication, dismissed for similar reasons. The paradox of the relation of mortal body and immortal soul, so poignantly experienced by the ‘youthful mother’ of the child whose journey of life must lead to sickness, old age, and death, confronts the nuns in another form:

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother’s reveries,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
And yet they too break hearts — O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise —
O self-born mockers of man’s enterprise.

Human bodies are but images of the soul; and the ‘images’ of saints and holy persons themselves serve only to remind their worshippers of the distance between earth and heaven; which the nuns seek to attain, as it is implied in the next stanza, by bruising the body to ‘pleasure soul’. The gods (the ‘self-born’, the ‘Presences’) who embody themselves in holy images — statues, icons — are ‘mockers of man’s enterprise’; the phrase recalls the ‘careless’ muses of the preceding stanza. Thus Yeats dismisses virtually the whole of the Western tradition on account of this separation of body and soul.
Now comes Yeats’s resolution of the paradox in his unifying image of the great Tree of Life, the ‘chestnut-tree’, perpetual manifestation of creation ever-flowing, as Iamblichus wrote of the music Pythagoras heard, from ‘a natural fountain or root’. There is nothing in the Greek or the Christian – Western – imagery hitherto presented to prepare us for this image of the tree. Have we here a transition from Platonic to Vedantic thought? For it was to the wisdom of India that Yeats was to turn increasingly in his later years, finding in the teachings of the Upanishads an answer which sufficed him. I believe that the image of the chestnut-tree marks such a transition — tree and dancer alike come from India, where the resolution of the paradox of body and soul is to be discovered in a thousand forms. Long ago in ‘Mohini Chatterjee’ Yeats had referred to this tradition in the lines:

Or, as great sages say
Men dance on deathless feet.

The image of the chestnut-tree, which so suddenly, without transition or preparation, bursts in its affirmative glory in the last stanza of ‘Among Schoolchildren’ is not self-evidently (as were the earlier references to Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and Catholic Christianity) a symbol representing a philosophic system; yet it is just this. We have already seen that the Tree of God is the central paradigm of the Cabbala, so long studied by Yeats. We have also seen that Yeats had in earlier poems given back to that diagrammatic structure leaves blossom and fruit. Now in the perfect unity of a natural image — the specific naming of the chestnut-tree — and the symbol, Yeats’s poem reaches its climax of ecstatic affirmation:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O Chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

The reader’s sense of release in these lines is Yeats’s sense of release from western dualism in all its forms. I believe the poet’s transition
from reiteration to affirmation arises from his change of ground — one might almost say his conversion — to another tradition, that expressed in Kabir’s poem:

When He Himself reveals Himself, Brahman brings into manifestation that which can never be seen.
As the seed is in the plant, as the shade is in the tree, as the void is in the sky, as infinite forms are in the void —
So from beyond the Infinite, the Infinite comes; and from the Infinite the finite extends.
The creature is in Brahma, and Brahma is in the creature: they are ever distinct, yet ever united.
He Himself is the tree, the seed, and the form.
He Himself is the flower, the fruit and the shade,
He Himself is the sun, the light, and the lighted.
He Himself is Brahma, creature, and Maya.
He Himself is the manifold form, the infinite space;
He is the breath, the word, and the meaning.
He Himself is the limit and the limitless: and beyond both the limited and the limitless is He, the Pure Being.
He is the Immanent Mind in Brahma and in the creature.
The Supreme Soul is seen within the soul.
The Point is seen within the Supreme Soul,
And within the Point, the reflection is seen again.
Kabir is blessed because he has this supreme vision!

— and again:

As the seed is within the banyan tree, and within the seed are the flowers, the fruits and the shade,
So the germ is within the body, and within that germ is the body again.

This undisclosed background of the great Indian spiritual tradition, as expressed in Kabir’s poems, removes all obscurity from Yeats’s lines; and at the same time makes it clear that he is in this poem contrasting two traditions, that of the objective dualistic mind of the West with the unitive mind of the East in which the poet found his own long-sought resolution.

Thomas Parkinson, one of Yeats’s more perceptive critics, wrote in his book W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (p.108) ‘Two of Yeats’s favourite icons standing for unity of being, the tree and the dancer, represent an
integrity of parts so welded as to make any abstraction from them impossible, dramatizing "... the flow of flesh under the impulse of passionate thought" that he so admired. The tree, then, of manifested being is itself a dance informed by the eternal dancer, the nataraja; the two images of unity, tree and dancer, are fused in one. We have seen in the poem quoted from The Green Helmet that Yeats had already equated Tree with Man.

The Tree (whether cosmic or microcosmic) is called great-rooted because, as for Kabir, its root is God; it proceeds from Brahma, is rooted in the Infinite; as the Cabbalistic Tree of God is also said to have its roots above (in the unmanifest divinity) and its branches below, in creation. Pythagoras also is said to have heard the music of the spheres issuing from 'a natural fountain or root'. In another poem Kabir describes this root:

The Unconditioned is the seed, the Conditioned is the flower and the fruit.
Knowledge is the branch, and the Name is the root.
Look, and see where the root is: happiness shall be yours when you come to the root.
The root will lead you to the branch, the leaf, the fruit.
It is the encounter with the Lord, it is the attainment of bliss,
It is the reconciliation of the Conditioned and the Unconditioned.

(lxxx)

It is this total, blissful reconciliation that Yeats failed to find in any Western spiritual tradition.

* * *

In the writing of the last stanza of 'Among Schoolchildren' Yeats made many alterations; one rejected version reads:

O hawthorn tree, in all that gaudy gear,
Are you it all, or did you make it all,
O dancing couple, glance that mirrors glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

The hawthorn-tree is a native tree with, in Ireland (indeed in England also) strong and more or less sinister associations with the Other World of the fairy-people as in 'the wicked, crooked, hawthorn tree' in the ballad which ends The King of the Great Clock Tower,
(1934). Did Yeats change the species of the tree for these reasons or because the chestnut-tree is greater and more majestic? Or because its inflorescences (often called its 'candles') might suggest the sephiroth as 'lights' hanging on the Tree of God of which it is therefore a more fitting image than the foamy white blossoms of the hawthorn? This is of course speculation, and we can never know.

To return to the second symbol, that of the Dancer. This image is not present in the poem by Kabir already quoted, but it occurs in many others throughout the same volume, dance and dancer being indeed the Indian symbol par excellence: Shiva dances, and Kali, and all things dance; as in this poem:

He is pure and indestructible,
His form is infinite and fathomless,
He dances in rapture, and waves of form arise from His dance.
The body and the mind cannot contain themselves,
when they are touched by his great joy.
He is immersed in all consciousness, all joys, and all sorrows;
He has no beginning and no end;
He holds all within his bliss! (xxvi)

There are many other references to the Dance:

Before the Unconditioned, the Conditioned dances;
'Thou and I are one!' this trumpet proclaims. (xxviii)

and again

Mad with joy, life and death dance to the rhythm of this music.
The hills and the sea and the earth dance. The world of men
dances in laughter and tears. (xxxii)

But enough has surely been said to recreate the background of Yeats's Tree:

There is a strange tree, which stands without roots and bears fruits
without blossoming;
It has no branches and no leaves, it is lotus all over. (xlvii)

Yeats had of course used the dance in earlier poems; as with the fairy
dancers of The Stolen Child, 'mingling hands and mingling glances'. Here
the dance is the simple, country courtship-dance as Yeats had seen it
many times in the village dancing-places of Ireland. The 'dancing couple' appears in a rejected version of the last stanza of 'Among Schoolchildren'. But in Yeats's later poem the dance becomes ever more deeply rooted in a cosmic vision, ever closer to the Indian concept of the sacred dance. Was Yeats perhaps even thinking of the Indian dancer in her 'make-up' and jewellery when he wrote of the 'gaudy gear' of the hawthorn tree in the rejected version we have seen? The words 'glittering' and 'gaudy' seemed to run through the poet's mind as he pondered these lines. Other rejected versions are:

1) O dance are footfall, shoulder, glittering
2) O blazing foot, of glittering glance
3) O body swayed to music, O glittering glance

The 'glittering' or 'brightening' glance of the dancer is something that must strike anyone watching the classical Indian dances. Dr Santosh Pall, dancer as well as Yeats scholar, whom I have had the pleasure of watching many times, has explained to me that the use of the eyes follows a strict rule in which 'the eye follows the hand, and the mind follows the eye'. Yeats possessed a copy of Coomaraswamy's book on the Indian dance, The Mirror of Gesture, where he would have found this set forth.

Thomas Parkinson points out that Yeats hesitated between a 'dancing couple' and the single dancer of his final and unsurpassable image; and both images are to be found in Kabir. Yeats would certainly have read Ezra Pound's translations of ten poems of Kabir, first published in an Indian journal, published in Calcutta, The Modern Review, in 1913 and subsequently in his volume of Translations. Pound's selection (translated in collaboration with Kali Mohan Ghose) brings out strongly the themes of love and the dance—the dance of love; as in the tenth of the sequence:

The paired lovers of the universe are assembled.
Saith Kabir: This day I act out for my marriage
With a bridegroom who is deathless.

But again, the absolute monism of Kabir's thought (learned from his teacher Ramanuja, who was himself in reaction against the abstruse intellectualism of the philosophy of the time) tends always towards the image of unity which Yeats himself preferred in the final version of 'Among Schoolchildren'—a single dancer rather than a dancing
couple. Yeats in his later poems himself adhered to the beautiful image of the single dancer, an image of unity, rather than the dancing couples of his earlier poems. The ‘Sweet Dancer’ of Last Poems dances alone — an image of unity of being:

The girl goes dancing there
On the leaf-sown, new-mown, smooth
Grass plot of the garden;
Escaped from bitter youth,
Escaped out of her crowd,
Or out of her black cloud,
Ah, dancer, ah, sweet dancer!

If strange men come from the house
To lead her away, do not say
That she is happy being crazy;
Lead them gently astray;
Let her finish her dance,
Let her finish her dance,
Ah, dancer, ah, sweet dancer!

And so with Kabir; the ultimate meaning of the dance is beyond courtship: it is unity of being within the harmony of the entire manifested cosmos, rooted in God. To quote again from Ezra Pound’s beautiful translation:

My dearest is within me, what do I care?
The beloved is not sundered from me,
No, not for the veriest moment.
And I also am not sundered from him.
My love clings to him only,
Where is the restlessness in me?
My mind dances on, dances with joy,
Dances like a mad fool.
The raginis of love are being played day and night,
All are listening to that measure.
Rahn, the eclipse, Ketu, the Head of the Dragon
And the nine planets are dancing,
And Birth and Death are dancing, mad with Ananda.
The mountain, the sea and the earth are dancing,
The Great Adornment is dancing with laughter and tears and smiles.
Why are you leaving 'the World',
You, with the tilak-mark on your forehead?
While my mind is a-dancing through the thousand
stages of its moon,
And the Lord of all his creation has found it acceptable
dancing? (iv)

There is of course a Western tradition of erotic mystical imagery — in
the writings, for example, both of St Teresa of Avila and of St John of
the Cross; but nowhere is the relationship of the soul with God as that
of the bride with the bridegroom more rhapsodically affirmed than by
Kabir. In many passages this affirmation of love – bakhti – goes with a
rejection of knowledge:

O man, if thou dost not know thine own Lord, of whereof art
thou so proud?
Put thy cleverness away: more words shall never unite thee to
Him.
Do not deceive thyself with witness of the Scriptures:
Love is something other than this, and he who has sought it truly
has found it. (lix)

The ecstatic love of the Sufi tradition is combined with the erotic cult
of Radha (the soul) and Krishna, the divine flute-player of the Hindu
pantheon. In poem after poem the nuptials of the soul are celebrated:

So high is my Lord's palace, my heart trembles to mount his stairs:
yet I must not be shy if I would enjoy his love.
My heart must cleave to my Lover; I must withdraw my veil, and
meet him with all my body:
Mine eyes perform the ceremony of the lamps of love.
Kabir says: 'Listen to me, friend: he understands who loves. If you
feel not love's longing for your beloved One, it is vain to adorn
your body, vain to put unguent on your eyelids.' (xi)

The supreme poet of bakhti, Kabir, writes

I am wandering yet in the alleys of knowledge without purpose,
but I have received His news in the alleys of knowledge (li)
and
I am now attached to truth, I have swept all tinsel away.
There is in Yeats's most explicit statement of his religious vision, 'Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient', a passage that comes closer to Kabir than to any Western source. The poet, freed from 'terror and deception'.

... can show at last
How soul may walk when all such things are past,
How soul could walk before such things began.

Then my delivered soul herself shall learn
A darker knowledge, and in hatred turn
From every thought of God mankind has had.
Thought is a garment and the soul's a bride
That cannot in that trash and tinsel hide.
Hatred of God can bring the soul to God.

At stroke of midnight soul cannot endure
A bodily or mental furniture.
What can she take until her Master give!
Where can she look until He make the show!
What can she know until He bid her know!
How can she live till in her blood He live!

It is impossible not to discern in Yeats's late and rhapsodic Supernatural Songs a music far removed from Western religious poetry, dwelling as it does rather on the separation (penitential or adoring) of the divine and the human than on union. It is the very fragrance and resonance of India that permeates the spiritual vision of Ribh, the Irish Holy Man as Yeats has created him. There is in Western tradition no union of lover and beloved so close as we find in the poetry of Rumi or of Kabir:

The inward and the outward are become as one sky, the Infinite and the finite are united: I am drunken with the sight of this All!

(xvii)

The poet sees afar off the knowledge and the beatitude experienced by saint and sage: 'the fragrant scent of “He is I” is borne on the wind.'
The Marvel of the Everyday

or

the fantastic and familiar universe of

Isaac B. Singer

JEAN MAMBRINO

The dead, like the living, call to me from everywhere  (I.B.S.)

The energy and joy, the soul's elation, the glance sparkling with wickedness and wisdom, filled with an enduring tenderness for life: everything about him elicits the appeal, like the cry of children wishing for enchantment: 'Tell us a story, grandfather!'

'If only,' says Singer, 'adults could behave in the same way!' This unexpected Nobel prize-winner, then, is like a grandfather overflowing with memories, whose joy consists in telling us stories, in bringing a light to our eyes, in making us happy even through our tears, and whose gentle method of instruction is to lose us in the forest of his tales. That he is a Jew of Polish origin, an emigrant to the United States in 1935; that he writes directly in Yiddish, language of a people (the Jewish communities of central Europe) who almost disappeared: these facts about him, however bloodstained, remain extrinsic.

All his characters, to be sure, are deeply rooted in their Jewish customs, rituals and traditions; but when he sits down at his desk it is not, he says, in order to tell a Jewish story. 'Any more than a Frenchman building a house in France says he is building a French house. He is building a comfortable house for his wife and children which, as it happens to be built in France, is French.' Behind the wealth (and the pettiness) of his people's traditions, Singer discerns a memory more profound, which speaks for all humanity: 'I am interested in what interests you or in what interests the Japanese: love, betrayal, hope, disillusion.' And I would add to these: desire, death, faith.
To read him is to share in the wanderings of a faceless pilgrim, who scatters for us on the way the treasure of his memories, extracting from them 'both new and old'; alert, at the same time, to every look he encounters, be it sublime, grotesque, or miserable. For the man who exists in the eternal everyday, everything undergoes a sweet renewal. He passes by, poor and mild, constantly on the move, yet living in the heart of things; he moves things, decentralizing them, and brings them back to the heart. When he stops to tell a story he gathers the whole universe around him: one or two tramps, an old woman with her bundle, two rapt lovers (she with her head and hair resting against his calm shoulder), and a child, open-mouthed, standing on one leg, the other foot folded into the hollow of the knee.

His stories are full of fantastic happenings, will-o'-the-wisps, ghosts, demons who come out of mirrors, jig-dancing corpses, disappearances, sudden reappearances, invisible voices. Everything, here and below, inside and out, tells of one world surging in on us from all sides. But the fantastic is merely the ironic mask of a secret that is simpler and more serious, and that brings us to the depths of the everyday, to the instant of mystery in all its nakedness and radiant grief, concluding in a movement of the soul in which adoration and gaiety come together of themselves.

The truth of life, as it appears in familiar things, is complex, overflowing, shimmering with riches: it is enjoyment, the taste of all foods, curiosity, attention to detail, delight in existence. In Singer's stories, as in the Bible, people are constantly eating: 'The intestine is endless'. The foods, dishes, sauces and various ingredients are minutely described. There is taste, warmth and vital pleasure even if the food is poor and the drink from a mountain stream. Bread and milk and an apple make a feast: 'He chewed each bite of the apple slowly to savor the full flavor'.

This universe is full of animals which are part of the pains and pleasures of men. 'All sorts of creatures crossed their path: a field mouse, a squirrel, even a tortoise. Unseen birds sang and trilled. In a clearing Yasha spied a flock of grey birds. They were lined up as if about to hold an assembly'. What we have here is a familiar association. A white butterfly takes refuge from the rain in a barn, beside a feeble fire. Jacob puts a crumb of bread beside it, but the insect remains
motionless. It is dead, and the poor slave sheds tears in his heart. ‘He would have liked to eulogize this handsome creature which had lived a day, or even less, and had never tasted sin’. So here the world of ordinary things is already opening onto questions which are vaster and unanswerable. If a cow turns its black, saliva-damp muzzle towards Jacob with humility, he feels it is grieved with him and is complaining dumbly: ‘You are a man and we are only cows. What justice is there to that?’ To comfort them he strokes their sides and gives them good fodder. ‘“Father”, he often prayed, “Thou knowest why Thou hast created them. They are the work of Thy hand. At the end of days, they too must have salvation.”’ In this way the heart of the pilgrim blesses all things, like ‘the dew [which] descended like flour from a heavenly sieve’. And the stars in the depths of the universe murmur a mysterious text, a message or hymn written on who knows what antique parchment.

Grief, of course, is everywhere, in the texture of each life as in the heart of History. A tragic illustration of this fact is the series of great novels which constitutes an impressive saga of Jewish Poland, from the 17th century to our time. Between the Russian Cossacks and the powerful Polish Catholics, the Hassidim’s life is far from rosy. They are the image of the oppressed through the ages. Yet in the depths of the very worst dereliction, they never lose contact with the humblest, most innocent creatures, and these restrain the narrator from becoming pompous. Thus, when the miserable Jacob, hounded by nobles and priests for having married a Catholic Pole, excommunicated by his own people for the same reason, goes after his wife’s death to find his child in the poor family who took it in, the peasant woman puts some of her own milk in a bottle for the baby, waking the animals in the dead of night: ‘The cat stretched, chickens clucked, worms crawled, a mouse poked its head out of a hole in the floor’. The little mouse in the corner is the narrator’s own signature.

In this way, a gentle irony makes its appearance in the most catastrophic situations, an expansive humour that endlessly transports and transfigures the characters, conferring on them a mysterious mildness which is realer than life. The old woman with a beard – a thick white beard! – who looks for the narrator in order to speak to him of her dying husband, tells with emotion how he fell in love with her at first sight, forty years ago, and only married her on the condition
that she never cut off her beard. ‘... he kissed my cheek, he exclaimed, “Zelda, you’re growing a beard!” And he fell into a strange rapture.’

Doctor Yaretsky, too, is refreshingly insolent towards the great ones of this world. When the Polish mayor comes to see him for the first time, the doctor addresses him in Yiddish, as though he has to do with a Jewish notable: ‘Headache? say: ah! ... Then he tickled the mayor under the armpits’. In the same marvellous story, entitled The Shadow of the Cradle, a certain Helena, famous for her love of animals, has an all-blue room built for her goldfish. I think, too, of the ball scene, and of the story of the lost napkin, of the enamoured old maid, or of the imaginary admirer.

The stories are indeed full of humour (the great novels are more serious), although one cannot isolate its specific characteristics. It is a climate of the soul, a way for the pilgrim to efface himself, and all things, through self-mockery. It is like a game of hide-and-seek. The storyteller appears and disappears among the trees of his story, puts on the mask of one character, reappears with another, laughs while weeping, weeps in a burst of laughter. Not sceptical but modest, he is lovingly attached to all forms of life, in a kind of luminous distance. He is going, going, gone.

But the central source of his inspiration is love, with its thousand marvels and miseries, its violence and gentleness, its tears, ecstasies, crudity and light. Endlessly and in all keys, without losing the smile I spoke of, he takes up the refrain of the Song of Songs. It is this song, with its wholly Biblical freedom, which opens him to the adoration of the living God. And he adds: ‘For me, when two beings — a man and a woman, or two men or two women — embrace each other, swear eternal love and give themselves to one another in passion, it is not simply an act of the flesh, but something which goes far beyond it.’

It is not surprising, then, that the old pilgrim, overflowing with memories, should be drawn above all to the ardent encounters between created beings. His masterpiece is entitled Enemies, a Love Story! It contains everything: the contradictions of desire and tenderness which are not, perhaps, contradictions at all; the soul’s involvement in spite of seeming unfaithfulness; all the pettiness and magnificence of love. ‘As for love, these professionals used the word as if it were capable of clear definition — when no one had yet discovered its
true meaning'. Asha Heschel, divided between Hadassah, Adele and Barbara, lives painfully what the magician of Lublin experiences in irony and the plunge into mysticism. This agony reveals the most secret and profound part of the soul, which scares even those who set themselves up as the liberators of others. 'One thought plagues me - have I acted properly? Did I have the right to take him from his child? They all think that I've committed a crime. Even those who consider themselves progressive. They talk and read so much about love, but when it comes down to it they're a bunch of fanatics'.

When one approaches the inner dimension of a life, one perceives its complexity, its surprises, its almost infinite nuances, more delicate and elusive than a crown of feathers, not because truth is relative, but because it is singular. Yasha, that labyrinthine character, '... was a maze of personalities - religious and heretical, good and evil, false and sincere. He could love many women at once. Here he was, ready to renounce his religion, yet - when he found a torn page from a holy book he always picked it up and put it to his lips. Everyone was like a lock, each with his own key'.

A deeper level is tapped here than by Bernanos' affirmation that there are within us successive truths. We are dealing with truths which I would call simultaneous, which radiate out from different levels of ourselves - or, rather, from different points of the sphere of our being. Needless to say, the surface is no less 'true' than the centre. The remembrancing narrator, lucid, wise, and desirous of instructing us (let us not forget this fact), in opening up to us the hearts of his characters, both bestows on us knowledge of our own hearts, and teaches us to refrain from judgement. Our concept of love is perhaps rather brief, our attitude towards desire over-anguished, our experience of fidelity too possessive.

'I suppose you had women enough over there,' she said, amazed by her own words.
'Sometimes.'
'So you weren't faithful even to your beloved Hadassah.'
'That has nothing to do with faithfulness.'

Esther, the wife of the tight-rope walker (whose emotional life is as unsteady as his body on the rope) understands this perfectly. She looks at him while he is eating. 'Who was he? Why did she love him?
She knew he led a wicked life. She did not reveal all she knew. . . . But she could hold no grudges against him. Everyone vilified him and pitied her, but she preferred him above any man, no matter how exalted — even a rabbi'.

In turn Genia, ‘faithful’ for so long, chooses herself a lover practically with her husband Zelig’s agreement. As a game? Out of defiance, or profound vacuousness? Or as a gesture of liberty in imitation of the pleasures to which Zelig is given over? It all escapes us, as it does her. The night on which she tells him of this attachment of hers, she starts sobbing like a little girl. ‘What should I do? If you are ready to die, I’ll die with you — just to show you that I belong to you and not to anyone else’. Then Zelig, rather late in the day, seems to comprehend the words of another character in the book: ‘Property is theft’. And at the end of that same night, he comes to the conclusion that men ‘must kill in themselves their strongest instinct: the possession of a woman as a piece of property’, adding, ‘If there is a God, maybe He’s leading us in this direction’. Humour can scarcely veil the gravity of these words. Between beings who love each other there is a great mystery, irreducible to formulas or laws.

What should we say, then, of Elka, who throughout her life, and with the connivance of the whole village, jeered at poor Gimpel, whom everybody called ‘the fool’, yet failed to extinguish the love he bore her? After her death she appears to him in a dream, and he calls to her, weeping and begging her to take him away: ‘. . . she consoles me and tells me to be patient. The time is nearer than it is far. Sometimes she strokes and kisses me and weeps upon my face. When I awaken I feel her lips and taste the salt of her tears’. Above all, what should we say of the exquisite story which is one of Singer’s childhood memories, and whose smiling, shocking tenderness seems inspired by God’s own humour? A very old woman comes one day to the rabbi to ask for a divorce for love of her husband! He is still full of vigour and she is too decrepit to please him with her body. So she has chosen him a new wife, rounded and rosy, whom the good man can scarcely refuse. The old woman ends by convincing the rabbi, and, radiant with heavensent joy (to the great scandal of the neighbourhood) she prepares all the details of her husband’s future happiness. He dies soon after the wedding, and the loving wife hastens to rejoin him in the grave. Love cannot be tarnished in a heart which is wholly possessed by it.
Sometimes it is enough for two timid people simply to exchange spectacles, and the Song of Songs shines forth for ever after.\textsuperscript{35}

Everything starts in childhood, on the eve of the Sabbath, when the house is plunged in darkness and the men are singing ‘The Son of the heavenly palace’. The child stands behind his father’s armchair, looking out of the window at the first stars pacing through the infinite depths. ‘In another room my mother would sit murmuring softly the prayer “God of Abraham”. Our home at this time was permeated by the spirit of God, of angels, of secrets, and filled with a special longing and yearning that defy description.’\textsuperscript{36} The dwelling of childhood has expanded to take in the entire universe. Gnomes, evil spirits, angels and demons, appearances, disappearances, visitations from the dead: these have accumulated joyfully since that time in the spirit of the narrator, who delights in making our hearts beat faster as he prepares us for something else.

For the fantastic, of course, is everywhere, perfectly natural, because \textit{all is madness}. The universe moves and trembles, the invisible tumbles down, the world beyond peers forth like the mouse in the skirting (let us not forget the wickedness of the narrator, who disguises in this way what he wishes us to learn from him).

‘The moment the Infinite Light shrank and grew dim, and Creation began, insanity was born. The demons are all crazy. Even the angels are not completely sane. The world of matter and deeds is an insane asylum.’

‘How about a stone?’ Zalman the glazier asked.

... ‘Really, a good question. With the exception of God and a stone, everything is mad.’\textsuperscript{37}

Madness or wisdom: who knows! What is certain is that nothing is certain. The peasant behind his plough disappears suddenly in the midst of his work, spirited away, taken up like the prophet Elijah into the clouds. But the big shed nearby also disappears one fine day, with all it contains, leaving no trace on the dry and stony earth, which has remained seemingly undisturbed for centuries. Panic grips the people, who search for it near and far: the shed has vanished. And one fine morning, there it is back in the same place, as full as before. Such are the tricks the evil spirits play on us. All is real, minutely described, and
we rub our eyes like ordinary folk. But after all, if men can just disappear one day, as though through a trapdoor or swept up into an air current (to reappear later in a look, a profile, a movement of the lips, a dimple in the chin), the objects surrounding them can also come and go on little trips of their own. If a lovely naked woman worships her image in the mirror too often, why be surprised if a demon appears in it, and, holding out his hand to her, draws her through to the other side, into a scorched land? What is time? How does it mingle with space? Where exactly does the past dwell? And the present itself? Esther, who has known the hell of the death-camps, sees one night, in a cafeteria on Broadway, Hitler and all his henchmen seated round a table, dressed in white robes with a swastika on the sleeve. (Some days later, that cafeteria goes up in flames.) But the same Esther appears to the narrator, long after her death, in a street in Jerusalem, her arm through the arm of another corpse. 'The world is full of dead ones in sable capes and fur coats who carouse among the living. Maybe your neighbour, maybe your wife, maybe you yourself... Unbutton your shirt. It's possible that underneath your clothes your body is wrapped in a shroud.' For death does not exist. 'How could it exist when everything is God's creation?' This certitude seems to me to spring from a sense of wonder, and of astonishment as well. 'The mere fact that I exist is a mystery to me. I may not believe what the holy books say, but I feel the mysteries of creation near me, and I am in league with the mysteries.' Astonishment is itself an opening, an expansion of the spirit: it sets free the self. But the sense of wonder implies a deeper release, a tranquillity of the soul relieved of its fears, refusals, or retreats (all that springs from tension, remorse, or bitterness). He who marvels forgets himself, consents without knowing it, leaps forward and communes, stands, without being aware of it, in front of a light. He advances and abandons himself to her who draws him. An action of infinite magnitude is accomplished, whose perfection is infinite. The whole universe modulates like a single and completely perfect verse. 'A hidden hand had shaped and modeled each stalk, blade of grass, leaf, worm, fly. Each hovering butterfly's wings exhibited a unique design... Observe how the gaze goes out to infinitesimal creatures, almost as evanescent as the hand that fashions them. Observe how it pursues
them and unites them in their immeasurable difference: ‘Yasha marveled at them. Where did they come from? How did they exist? What did they do in the night? They died in winter but, with summer, the swarms came again. How did that happen? . . . The leaves of the apple trees were wet with dew and sparkled like like little candles in the morning light.’

So we return, through these tiny creatures, to the familiar: the supernatural resembles God’s natural world! Religion returns to its place, modest, relative, almost domestic. So many suffocating, arbitrary laws, with exorbitant pretensions, have accumulated over the centuries. ‘. . . Laws were as numerous as the sands of the desert. Each generation added its own strictures. . . .’ A good dose of humour is what is needed to loosen their shackles. ‘To the earnest moralists who attempted to get him to mend his ways, he would always answer: “When were you in Heaven, and what did God look like?”’

The rituals too, which the narrator has described so often and so devoutly, proliferate in the same way, until our pilgrim of the long memory is secretly ironical at their expense. Perhaps, by means of his memories which assume the form of fables, he wishes to introduce us to a prayer as imperceptible and familiar as our own unaware inhalation; a prayer which blends with our everyday gestures, which dissolves, as it were, into the soul’s most intimate breath.

Who, indeed, has known longer about prayer, is more familiar with the Ineffable, than the poor folk, those modern anawim glimpsed by the pilgrim in passing? Such is Yanda, nicknamed ‘pockmarked Yanda’, the miserable peasant woman who serves all men, and of whom all men make use. She is a servant in an inn where over the years Russians, Austrians, Germans, Magyars, Serbs, Poles and finally Bolsheviks have come. She does everything, busies herself with everything, calm and gentle, offered for free to anyone who takes a room for the night. Then the innkeeper (whose name is Shalom!) dies, and she goes away by herself to her native village where lives her one-time fiancé, who had refused to wed her. She finds him aged, unrecognizable, dead-drunk, living in a sort of stable which swarms with his children, who are dirtier and more wicked than animals, semi-idiots, images of an infinite misery. And pockmarked Yanda, tireless still, takes it all in hand, washes, cares for, tames, feeds, serving her new children with adorable sweetness. But in the night, the eldest boy throws himself on top of her
and in spite of her pleas, takes her by force. Yanda shuts her eyes: 'Well, I'm lost anyhow, she thought'. Sacred purity! — she is saved, a thousand times over, more even than the good thief.

Yanda, the slave Jacob, Wanda his beloved, Heschel, Herman, Gimpel, Yasha the magician, and Chazkele of the pungent, shocking blasphemies: all are wanderers, pilgrims of existence, poor and mendicant, ironical towards themselves, their hearts overflowing with praise and gaiety. Yes: that, I believe, is the secret. The pilgrim is light of heart who passes by, who savours, each day, his little morsel of life, marvelling as he raises to his lips the rose of fresh spring water, amazed if anyone looks at or listens to him for a moment, blessing every innocent and wounded creature. He it is who divests himself in passing, leaving behind him all his poor treasures; who does not forget, and forgets himself in sharing; who finds God when he has lost all.

Here is a last story, entitled Joy. The pious rabbi Bainish was an old man at 50, when he buried his eldest daughter after having buried his four sons. There remained his beloved Rebecca. When she died he lost his faith, scandalizing his community. His wife left him, and he was alone. He sold all his possessions, his favourite objects, silver candlesticks, the great candelabra Chanukak, his gold watch, the Easter dish, and distributed the proceeds among the poor. He began to fast, in savage, dumb despair. Then Rebecca appeared to him without having opened the door, smiling and dressed in white.

‘Happy holiday, Father.’
‘Happy holiday, happy new year,’ the rabbi said.
‘Father, say grace.’
‘What? Of course, of course.’
‘Father, join the guests at table,’ she said, half-commanding, half-imploring.

Then the Rabbi remembered that she was dead. All that was left of the apparition was 'a sense of wonder, a supernatural tang, a touch of heavenly joy'. He got up, went into the study room for evening prayer with the community, and to everyone's amazement delivered a mysterious commentary on the Torah. 'Of all the blessings bestowed on man, the greatest lies in the fact that God's face is hidden from him. ... He hides His face, and the children seek Him while they have faith
that He exists.' But what happens if darkness fills the spirit of the just man, if his soul errs? If he loses faith? Well, said the Rabbi, and made an extraordinary pronouncement: the truth appears to him! ' . . . when the pious man falls from his rank, and becomes, like the wicked, without permanent shelter, then a light shines from above, and all doubts cease. . . .' His voice became a murmur, and the old men leaned forward to hear him. The study room was filled with such peace that the candles could be heard sputtering.

Shortly after the feast of Yom Kippur, his wife back at his side, all the community around him, the Rabbi lay down to die. Near the door he saw his four sons, his two daughters, and his father, stretching out their arms to him, held back by an invisible barrier.

Each of them emitted a different light. . . . 'So that's the way it is,' the Rabbi thought. 'Well, now everything is clear.' He heard his wife sob, and wanted to comfort her, but no strength remained in his throat and lips. Suddenly Reb Abraham Moshe leaned over him, as though realising that the Rabbi wished to speak, and the Rabbi murmured, 'One should always be joyous.'

Those were his last words.

Having said which, Singer, the old teller of stories, slips away on the quiet, leaving behind him a trail of silence.


Notes

2 This language was murdered in the Nazi gas ovens and the Soviet extermination camps. In Israel, Hebrew is spoken almost exclusively.
3 From an interview with the New York Book Review, reproduced in L'Express, 14th October, 1978.
4 His books, which have been translated all over the world, are particularly popular in Japan!
5 Ibid.
6 The Magician of Lublin, translated from Yiddish by Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer, Jonathan Cape, London, 1973, p.35. Cf. ibid., p.11: ' . . . roast goose, jellied calf's foot, chopped herring, egg cookies, pretzels, had been laid out on the counter. '

The Slave, op. cit., p.52. Cf. ibid.: ‘Its wings were smoother than silk and covered with an ethereal dust. It rested on the stone like a shrouded corpse.’

Ibid., p.51.

The Magician of Lublin, op. cit., p.26. Cf. ibid.: ‘There was a seething in the fields, as if unseen grains poured into an unseen mill.’


One should read his children’s stories (see note 8), in which the marvellous and the reasonable come together in an exquisitely comical way.

The Slave, one of his first books, is nevertheless purely tragic in tone, whereas Enemies, a Love Story sparkles with humour, although it is no less serious.

‘Sex and the supernatural go very largely together. Desire for a being is not simply a question of physical desire, but of a desire of the soul.’ From an interview with the New York Times Book Review, reproduced in L’Express, 14th October, 1978.

Herman Broder, a Jew who survived the Nazi massacres, lives in New York and is married to the servant who saved him, but is also seeing Masha, for whom he has a burning passion. Suddenly Tamara reappears, his first wife, who was thought to have died in a camp...

‘I want to have all three, that’s the shameful truth ... Tamara’s become prettier, calmer, more interesting. She’s suffered an even worse hell than Masha. Divorcing her would mean driving her to other men.’ Enemies, op. cit., pp. 89–90.

From the diary of Hadassah in The Family Moskat, op. cit., p.430.

‘Because if there is such a thing as truth it is as intricate and hidden as a crown of feathers.’ A Crown of Feathers, op. cit., p. 32.

The Magician of Lublin, op. cit., p. 58. Cf. the good Sonia in A Crown of Feathers, op. cit., p. 227: ‘... she was essentially a small-town, modest woman, although in moments of passion she could utter words that might surprise the Marquis de Sade.’

Les Nouvelles Littéraires, 10th October, 1978.

The Family Moskat, op. cit., p.416.

The Magician of Lubin, op. cit., p.23. This is followed by the wonderful observation: ‘As soon as he put his arm around her she was aroused, like an adolescent – since a woman who has not been pregnant remains virginal forever.’


Ibid., p.78.

Ibid., p.198.


In my Father's Court. A Memoir, Penguin Books, 1980, pp.13–19. This book recounts the conversations in the form of judgements between Singer's father, a rabbi at Varsovia, and all those who came before his 'court'.


In my Father's Court, op. cit., p.29. Cf. further on: 'The house was filled with the odor of burning wax, blessed spices, and with an atmosphere of wonder and miracles.'


'... like doctors or orderlies', she specifies. A Friend of Kafka, op. cit., p.87.


Cf. Enemies, op. cit., p.83: '... our little David and Yocheved come to me. Not in my dreams, but when I am awake. ... Where they are they are children again.'

A Friend of Kafka, op. cit., p.212.

Who knows what is madness and what isn't? A man mustn't be sad. To be melancholy is to be an idolater.' The Family Moskat, op. cit., p.408.

Collected Stories, op. cit., pp. 29–37. When reproached for wasting his wealth, the rabbi replied: 'Poor men do exist. That's one thing of which we can be certain.' Ibid., p.33.
Birthday Suit

Seer's Caul

Magical clothes that weigh an ounce,
That will take me through every element,
One ounce lumping weight, as through the aits
Or eyots of the Thames where the current balances
And carves its arbours that I remember:

Vistas of infinite resource
As if the whole Thames were a big store
Laid out for the children and every child was rich;

Taking me through them as a child on sunlit water
Past the spongy banks exhaling bough-linked avenues,
The weirs breaking white in all the wonders of zest,
Of zyme in the air, and the child

The gem at the centre of the making,
In this magical suit,
That weighed at lumping not an ounce, voyaging.

Last Supper of the Year

I
Fume of their last supper before winter,
Their last feast.
Bees, butterflies, and big old wasps
All feast in wintery weather
On the pale green circular ivy flowers;
The peaceable feast of the carnivores,
The vegetarians, the carrions:
The wasps, the bees and the flies;
Yellow-green platters
Of beady ivy-flowers,
Circular dishes of yellow-green beads
They peaceably feast on together;
They play you an organ-note as you pass by;

And the hover-flies, imitation meateaters,
Wrapped in the pelts of wasps that pierce
The flanks of the fruit and the winding ivy-veins;
Horse-flies that feed on our companions,
Our steeds, the companions of the storms.

Then there are the beetles of the interiors
That pace at beetle-tempo the powdery pistils,
And the toads that hunker, staring up
Out of the roots through the
Intricate ivy-palming,
Which strikes up its organ-hum as you pass by,
And a living fume arises from the platters
Among the gnats in fumes shaking their blood-cocktails.

II
Know, the surgeon will not eat before an operation;
See, the raw meat shining in the butcher's marble garden;
The hunter hews roses from his horse, companion of the storm,
With his sharp rowels; and in the fountains and parks
Of horsehide at beetle-tempo the tick plucks
From jasper scabs its enamelled rose-bunches;
The horsefly crams its bouquets into its gaping mask;

All feast;

I feast on the storm and its fluids,
The great flanks wheeling on the wind,
The revolving banquet of electricity and downpour.
I
How many teeth these white flakes have smoked through,
Teeth gritted like the snowflakes, the hurrying travellers,
Their breath lies on their shoulders, like short white capes.

My breath freezes in my beard, yet my kiss
Is the only warm thing in a bearded landscape,
And how clean the snow she disappears against
In her white furs all but her red lips going,
And her eyes lemon-bright, twists of lemon.

II
Still in summertime, the rock at sea
Beats with its gull-wings, the black rock
The sea whitens, and the gulls enamel; for white

Is one of the thresholds, just as the drifting stars
Mark the boundaries of perception. Again
The elms that are the boundaries of your land
Are loaded with snow, the trees of terminus
Of which coffins are made, the coffins
Lidded with white snow. The threshold

Is the casting-off place, and milk
The white, or spirit, of the giver, the white
Of the woman, moving within her, who,
Holding the sleepy child, is holding sleep and the future.

III
Snow is winding from the bosomy clouds
And the moon shines bright and full behind them
Like the source and origin of the river of milk

That rills from all the stars, feeding the dead,
And the living too, the ripe stars

A ripe fig full of seeds sticky with light.
IV
Frost gathers again on all the breathing beards
Of skiers hissing by under the clear night sky
Full of the fig-patterns of the ancients
Hanging by their white beards, or orbiting
In whizzing tracks of skis beyond the skies.

Silent Shewman

I
Dumb as a conjurer,
His pleasant manners with his hands,
Tongue-tied before his own marvels.
There is a certain trick,
A game played in the dark
Among the invisibles,
Which is why he is dressed in black
Entering into these marvels
Through the portals of his cabinets
Painted in rich gold
Of dandelion and acacia,
The creamy white
Of hawthorn and clover.
Inside the wood it is dark,
But, little boy,
The conjurer is with you,
So tread the boards boldly,
Agree to vanish;

You will come again, little soul,
Stepping out of some other cabinet,

Wondering.
Let the name of my bow

Be death, says the conjurer,
But let its work be life

As he notches his plume
Aims at his audience

And traverses the drawn point
Along the rows; the public

Smiles back weakly, defenceless.
But he turns round and shoots it

Through the hawthorne and acacia
To lodge where it will

Through the sides of the cabinet.
We all think of the red heart in the wood.

II
The road of the death: wherever
A corpse has been carried.

That is a public throughfare
And this is his stage

These crossroads, Maître Carrefour.
We shall all dress in black one day

And move about his thoroughfares
Trusting his thorn pricking the heart

To lead our blind faces.
Glass

I
The red wine of autumn, or its litmus.
The backbone of light shafting down.
The shivering life in stripped twigs.
The wineglass of a dead friend, drunk up.

II
The Brothers were buried
In a glass casket,
Which was an alchemical vessel.

At regular intervals
The philosopher,
Breaking the shell of his egg
Took up the concerns of life once more

Later to retire again
Into his shell of glass,
The mirror or the brilliant chiton,
Or the ancient bottle of wine laid down

III
The aura or the insensible perspiration,
The fountain of lights of the hidden stream,
The human atmosphere of living glass.

IV
The philosopher
Is said to be sleeping
In his egg, existing
In his own invisible bodies.

Periodically
He precipitates
The golden germ,
Builds a new
External form
And abides in it
Temporarily, peering
Out of its shining sides.

V
Within man's aura are the zones and belts,
The stars, the planets and the elements
Displayed and arranged as in water,
The observatory of the glassy harbour,
The gods, the demons and the angels seen, arrayed.
He is in his proper womb,
Like glass in glass, quickening.

VI
The mundane god possesses a winding form,
Of this spinal fire, the winding god.
They were called Snakes, the Bretheren,
Because they were masters, of this fire,
Their repeated skins cast
Like foam of glass.

VII
The shadow of the world lies sleeping
In the ocean, and this egg
Is the great cranium of the Zohar
Which is warmed from within and there hatches from it

Love, love, for the egg contains
The water of eternity residing
In its round glass, its speculum.

VIII
The god who is worshipped in the form of a serpent,
The spermatozoon, the seed-animal. It is
A little ark. So all the Earths
Germinate out of the astral fluid,
Liquor of the stars, their heads
Shining like glass,
Their wriggling rays.

IX
The world cell in which the earth circles,
The tuneful archoplasm, the transparent organ
That is the echoing of structures downwards,
The mineral, vegetable and animal forms
Becoming mothers in their turns, shown
Plainly in the dark glass he holds up.

X
The invisible rider of the white horse, called Frost.
The skull of the hoarfrost giant that is
The starry wall of the heavens
Glittering with bony fire.
Your own cranium, that microscopic heaven,
Is a fitted skull of twenty-two bones
Of which fourteen are the face, tough as glass,
Transparent to the occult rays.

XI
More doors of glass are opened out of the head
Than I will stand to number. But there are
Ten apertures to the body, and nine of these
Are apparent but the tenth is the first
Door of glass.

XII
The rolling away of the stones of the head, Bretheren.
Pattern by Keith Critchlow

© KC June 1984
Ganga (stone), from Sena, 12th century AD. New Delhi
The relation between aesthetics and literature – which, by the way, is not my theme – is far from simple. It is intimate, at the same time intricate. Philosophizing, which is inevitable, adds to the richness of the relationship. But there is also the danger: it tends to fall into the trap of the stereotype and the reductive. Else it becomes an independent activity, a secondary sophistication of which we have enough and to spare. This is what Collingwood condemned as the philosopher trying to reflect without having anything to reflect upon. The point is, we have moved into an area of human experience where, as Blake once said, to generalize is to be an idiot. Why? The reasons are complex. To mention a few, briefly: the mind is a reality-killer; the intellect is not the creator; and since no two works of art are exactly the same, no single generalization can cover all the facts; we need both insight and analysis. Not Either/Or but both. How can we have both, on a par, one passing into the other, a mutual flame, without one extinguishing the other?

Here Rabindranath is a paradigm, an exception or a warning, as you please. Beauty will save the world, said Dostoievsky’s Prince. As against the horrors and uglifications of history and the environment, such should be our faith too. Against the cannon’s roar the jasmine song, that was how Tagore put it.

For in his lucid moments Tagore had feared that the mantle of the philosopher might be fixed on to him. Sometime, it is true, especially when abroad, he lent himself – rather readily – to such role-playing. This has resulted in both gain and loss. What he really had to offer was perhaps not so much a schematic philosophy as an attitude, couched in an appeal. His literary criticism, not to be equated with his aesthetic principles, is another story with which we are not directly concerned.
On what is the attitude founded if not on experience, primarily his own? In the world of poetry the seer is the creator. Apāre kavasamsāre kavireva prajāpatih. Tagore knew — it could not be denied, anyway — that he was first and foremost a poet, āmi kavi. It is an honest confession, though it may not be of much help in pursuing an argument. If his religion, as he tells us, is a poet's religion, his theory of art is even more so. ‘All that I feel about it,’ he says, ‘is from vision and not from knowledge.’ Again: ‘I suppose I was fortunate in that I never had academic training.’ Not wholly fortunate, seeing that both his strength and weakness stem from the same source. There is little doubt that he is temperamental rather than canonical, romantic rather than Vedantic, sentimental rather than naïve. The thrust is the thrust of a temperament and not of a tradition in the sense, say, of a Coomaraswamy for whom art was not a celebration of sensibility but an adjustment to the sacred world of archetypes, not aesthetics but rhetoric.

It is typical that in his aesthetic writings Tagore rarely mentions any ancient or mediaeval texts. The most frequent references are to a few verses from the Vedas, the Upanishads and to English romantic poetry, usually Shelley and Keats, now and then Wordsworth. But if a romantic, a romantic with a difference; he is in some ways the least rebellious. The ease with which he could lean upon the categories — such as Truth, Goodness and Beauty — made it unnecessary and impossible for him to adopt a stance of creative insolence. You may call him a piper of the perennial philosophy, but piper with a tune of his own.

But what contradictions! The believer in seer-wisdom has repeatedly asserted his ties with the outsiders, the vrātyas and the bāūls. As he said, a trifle dramatically, in one of his later poems: ‘I am an outcaste.’ Do we here touch upon another Tagorean paradox as well as his passion for the a-historical and the trans-social? With all his inherited decorum and social sympathies, Tagore is unable to look upon art as a purely social product, as something entirely determined by socio-economic factors governed by utilitarian considerations. Causation — or what he calls ‘historicity’ — annoys him. He finds ‘the indignity of the suggestion insufferable’. In ‘The Religion of an Artist’ he tells us, obviously with a confessional slant, ‘The poem no doubt comes from the person who produced it... (But) directly a poem is fashioned, it is free from its genesis, it minimizes its history and
emphasises its independence. The same thing is true of all creation. A dewdrop has no filial memory of its parentage. Neither the scientist nor the sociologist is likely to accept such minimization of history and maximization of aesthetic independence without serious qualifications. For himself Tagore goes on to add: 'The materials or ingredients of creation are supplied partly by history, partly by society, but these neither make nor explain the creator.' The autonomy of art-experience will not permit Tagore to accept any deterministic dogma, ancient or modern.

A protagonist of process and the primacy of the person, he is not a traditionalist in the traditional manner. In his essay, 'Art and Tradition' we find him saying: 'Art is not a gorgeous sepulchre, serenely brooding over a lonely and lost eternity of vanished years. It belongs rather to the procession of life, exploring unknown shrines of reality along its pilgrimage to a future which is as different from the past as the tree is different from the seed.' In spite of metaphors of pilgrimage and shrines of reality, Tagore is not affiliated to the school of ritualists or those who look upon art as a means of sacral self-integration, a secret known to the ancients as well as the mediaevalists; for instance, the theology of the Hindu temple, a symbol of re-integration. His sense of the solitary, the non-conformist is so basic and overpowering that his quest has always been a part of his own apartness:

Away from the crowd,
I have pursued my fancies
At the crossing of the roads.

The crossing, or bridge, where the individuals truly and freely meet, is — it seems — above and beyond social and historical events. This is his way of escaping or may be containing what Schopenhauer called 'the miseries of individuation' and the Buddhists the 'heresy of separateness'. To believe him, Art is a world of universal values. It is the world of what Tagore describes elsewhere as the Universal Man or Man the Eternal. 'The mysterious fact,' he explains, 'is that though the individuals are seeking their expressions separately, their success is never individualistic... Men must find and feel and represent in all their works the Eternal.' If it is said that such pursuits, with an eye fixed on the Eternal, involve what Toynbee called etherealization, that is as it should be. Our value-roots may be above rather than below.
This is the unified, magic world common to theosophy, Plotinian thought as well as the romantic imagination. There differences do not divide, and the subject-object, artist-audience and every other dualism which man is heir to disappears. In the Tagorean idiom, this is the meeting-point of the finite-Infinite, which, to believe him, is the theme of his poetry.

More explicitly, he tells us: 'In our life we have one side that is finite, where we exhaust ourselves at every step; and we have another side, where our aspirations, enjoyment and sacrifices are infinite. This infinite side of man must have its revelation in some symbols which have the elements of immortality.'

But sometime, one suspects, the passionate plea for idealism and the Infinite can turn into a refuge for avoiding encounter with disagreeable facts. True to his nature, somewhere he speaks of 'the tyranny of facts'. The question has then to be faced: is art a substitute universe or a transformed reality? An escape or a clarification? In Tagore the distinction is not always clear, though it is not too difficult to guess where his preferences would lie. Impatient with the actual and the humdrum, rather late in life he acquired the humility and the insight that forced him to confess: 'How little do I know of the wide world'. The confession underlines a basic insufficiency of the romantic imagination, that the romantic did not know enough. His nuances of nostalgia tend to be lyrically monistic and the fusion of opposites, the polarities of the imagination, are not sufficiently stressed.

The feeling-tone and idealistic bias of Tagorean aesthetics is obvious. The feeling is part of a larger faith in culture, a life projected further, a heart more widely receptive. He says openly: 'I believe that there is an ideal hovering over and permeating the earth, an ideal of that Paradise which is not merely the outcome of fancy, but the ultimate reality in which all things dwell and move.' In brief, the ideal is the real or, as he says, 'more real'. This involves him, willynilly, in a theory of knowledge, even if he is chary of entering a debate. One is not surprised to hear him say that, in some respect, the world of science is unreal, since it is 'an abstract world of the relation of forces', a relation in which the subject, the person, has ceased to exist. Art, on the contrary, is an intensification of human reality, not its impoverishment. Lewis Mumford has said, the greatest achievement of science is
abolition of Man. As Rabindranath too complains, 'everywhere in man's world the Supreme Person is suffering for the killing of the human reality by the imposition of the abstract'. Art is human because it is intensely personal. 'A man's love-song should be his own.' As Tagore puts it, art is the language of personality. If you are not an artist you are not a person. A defence of the arts is not only a defence of the human but also of the humanities. The artist is one who finds 'the unique, the individual, which is yet the heart of the universal'. (One would like to know how.) Again we notice that though his philosophy of art is never fully or logically explicated it is there all the same.

A complex of ideas and attitudes, the philosophy is bound to be at variance with the utilitarian view, the majority view in all ages. Tagore's protest and affirmation are made in more holistic terms: 'If it is the total man we must have, the emotions and the sense of beauty cannot be overlooked.' This reminds of the Wordsworthian definition: 'The poet, described in perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity.' But what about the poetry of action? Or the sacramental view with its base in myths and rituals? In this respect, as we have said before, Tagore is more romantic than traditional. Sensibility and sanctity are equated; the same with Rasa (relish) and Ananda (delight). Dhyana (contemplation) is hardly mentioned. In his hands art has a tendency to be tangential, is equated almost wholly with a system of longings, and the beauty of an object is the measure of its suggestion of the beauty beyond. Ultimately, this becomes, or might become, alien to both the social and the existential situation. This is a danger that Tagore cannot be said to have escaped altogether.

But careful to derive the theory from the nature of reality, Tagore takes care to inform us: 'Reality reveals itself in the emotional and imaginative background of our life. We know it not because we can talk of it, but because we directly feel it.' Again: 'Reality is human... When we are aware of it we are aware of ourselves, and this gives us delight. Our arts and literature represent this creative fundamental in man.' We have to achieve the self in achieving reality, but the element of exploration and discovery is not so strong. Also one may wonder if feeling, even if a feeling of delight, should be given such unexamined dignity, unless of course one is prepared to equate the feeling with knowledge. May be in the Religion of an Artist – and in this he is not alone, think of Schiller – 'Joy is the creation of truth as we know it'
and all that we need to know. But such gestures may also mean the end of dialogue. Whereof one cannot speak, one must be silent. The transcendental critic has to own the paradox: that he is talking of that which is not to be talked of.

There is no doubt that through all these strategies he is leading us to the Mind of the Maker, and trying to see the object as it is, outside the causal or utilitarian nexus. The intuition into the life of forms is a knowledge that can hardly be called scientific, though a good deal of science is perhaps based on these flashes. In the Tagorean dictionary, this knowledge or insight is equated with delight, and an extension of personality or awareness, values which need no further support and argument. In other words, the approach is imaginative — call it esemplastic, to please the ghost of Coleridge — bordering on a knowledge by identity. But about the last point, whether this a prajñā (intuition), satori (enlightenment), or paramartha darśanam (insight into the final End or liberation), Tagore is never sufficiently specific, which is understandable. He does not say, like the icon-makers of old: devam bhūta devam yajet (worship God by becoming like God). Or like Plotinus: 'The eye could never have beheld the sun, had it not become sunlike. . . . Each must partake of the divine nature before it can discern the beauty of the divine.' The position he has taken — the priority of delight — prevents him from being too analytic.

We are not surprised to hear him say: 'Art cannot be explained.' Also: 'As for the definite meaning of a poem, we may have our doubts.' In effect, his whole approach is an apotheosis of mood and mystery, two potent factors in the Tagorean transaction with whatever is real and wonderful. Though far from being an existentialist, he often speaks of 'the eternal mystery of Being'. Works of art are embodiments and reminders of that Mystery. Therefore, they do not make 'sense', not in a quotidian calculus, anyway. Art is discourse in a dimension other than logical, it is conversation in another key.

As a rule Tagore is averse to defining art. But in the end he does it, to his own satisfaction. Referring in the same breath to Bengali devotional singing, Kirtan, and to Buddhist art, Tagore arrives at a definition near his heart's desire. Art, he tells us, 'is the response of man's creative soul to the Real.' Such a response, he clarifies, at least admits, may be biologically superfluous. Art is not a mundane, but a strange, an inner necessity. In the Tagorean inversion or trans-
valuation of values the superfluous turns out to be the most essential. The idea is central to his thesis and he repeats it ad lib. He chooses a startling phrase — of course in a non-Marxist sense — to highlight the nature of the surplus. 'Man's philosophy and science, indeed, his whole civilization is built upon the surplus.' The ascent of man, as Tagore annotates it, is the ascent of the non-material. 'He is fully represented in something that exceeds himself.' On airy clouds float the symphonies of the surplus calling man to further intensities. 'Then comes Art, and we forget the claims of necessity, the thirst of usefulness — the spires of our temple try to kiss the stars and the notes of our music to fathom the depths of the Ineffable.' With the help of a Vedic text, his invariable stand-by, he sublimes the theory to the law of the World-Game itself. 'Here (in superfluity or transcendence) we have the genesis of creation, and therefore the origin of art.' More simply: 'Where there is an element of the superflous in our heart's relation with the world, Art has its birth.' As Robert Frost put it, art is an extra, yet essential to the aesthetic being and education of man.

It is easy to see that such a meta-psychological theory in terms of the surplus tells us more of the ideal origin (of one kind) of works of art, as a transcendental mode of existence, than of the works of art per se. It is not easy to deduce canons of criticism from such an exalted exegesis that breaks away from or goes beyond the work of art to what may lie behind or beyond. The Tagorean theory tells us more of the creative impulse and less of the art object as an artefact, how it is made and what is to be done with it. It is more about the why and whence than about the how. The aspect of form, of making, medium and technique, communication, the structure and constructive process are left almost untouched. Though, as an artist, he knows the passion 'to make objectively real that which is inwardly real to us', he does not look upon the art object as an object among other objects. It is more a focus of psychological (invisible but real) energies, a magnetic field or psychic apparatus pointing to the beyond. Interestingly, Tagore does not equate the real with the beautiful. 'My friend may not be beautiful or useful, rich or great, but he is real to me. In him I feel an extension or my joy.' What else is there to be said about it?

This brings Tagore to the nature of aesthetic enjoyment. He has no hesitation in saying: 'Enjoyment is the soul of literature — enjoyment
which is disinterested.' That's the catch and also why 'before we can be qualified to enjoy and understand beauty, one has to go through a stage of discipline.' In a sense the true artist is an ascetic. The disinterestedness is a mark not only of the creative activity but also of its enjoyment, in and as freedom. To use another ancient equation: the delight self is the free self.

Hence the triumph — and, if you like, the 'meaning' of art — that it becomes a step towards self-expression whose other name is freedom, freedom from the empirical and the contingent, perhaps even from the torture and tyranny of history. In the words of Tagore: 'To give us a taste of reality through freedom of mind is the nature of all the arts.' Again: 'It is the aim of art and literature to realize and communicate the essential joy and immortality of Truth.' Beauty, like truth, will make you free. If this is so, art needs no better defence, especially in an age of the marginal, manipulable, instrumental men, sterile souls. Victims of attachment and preference, the Egotistical Sublimes are debarred from the Kingdom of Beauty.

As we have seen, according to Tagore, the object of art is not beauty but expression or self-expression. Yes, but not of this man so-and-so. What is of value in a work of art is the realizing of the self, a self-revelation. This is what unites art with life everlasting. In Tagore's view, 'Life is perpetually creative because it contains in itself that surplus which overflows the boundary of time and space, restlessly pursuing its adventure of expression in varied forms of self-realization.' At least so runs the Tagorean gospel, with a haunting music or appeal of its own. But, obviously, the self that is spoken of here is not the separative ego, tied to a world of needs and the lower passions, but the 'true self' one in all, the same in everything and always, some irreducible unity of man, nature and spirit, if not history. (The poetry of history is, perhaps, man's last hurdle.)

Be that as it may, we return to the one Tagorean constant: delight. As he says: 'In art we express the delight of this unity by which the world is realized as humanly significant to us.' It is its own ontology, ananda Yoga, as he calls it. He explains it thus: 'The consciousness of the real within us seeks for its corroboration the touch of the Real outside me. . . . A large and deep experience of our personal self through sympathy and imagination. Till the I am realizes its extension, its own infinity, whenever it truly realizes something else.' Simply, art
is the bridge, the meeting-ground between the lesser I am and the greater I am.

With so much sympathy and imagination, such refinement and universality, Tagore does not altogether escape historic and temperamental limitations. The aesthetics is sensitive rather than heroic. Also he now and then speaks in terms of the old East–West dichotomy. For instance, when he generalizes: 'The West may believe in the soul of Man, but she really does not believe that the universe has a soul.' This may be largely or statistically true, especially of the post-industrial West, whose greatest contribution retrospectively is pollution. But as a friend, if not follower, of the great English romantics, how could he forget Wordsworth, Shelley and Coleridge, not to mention others?

The nature of art as transcendent messenger, and the enlargement of awareness (cittā vistāra, of Indian aesthetics), helps Tagore to touch upon the ethical issue, but from another angle than that of convention. Without recommending any particular ethical norm, art leads to the same goal — of sympathy and disinterestedness. An instrument of the good, the imagination sweetens the rigour and rigidity of particular ethical injunctions or systems. Is the imagination indeed mayāvi (magician), an echo or shadow of the archetypal mayāvi, Brahman or Iswar? Brahmasvādasaḥodara (akin to the relish — or knowledge of Brahman)? But one treads upon such theology with fear and trembling. This of course agrees with the romantic credo: 'The poet binds together the vast empire of human society.' Utopian to the hilt, Tagore extends the law of the individual to society. To believe Tagore: 'The strongest barrier against freedom in all departments of life is the selfishness of individuals or groups.' 'Civilizations perish when some selfish passion replaces a moral ideal.' Whether the decline of civilizations adorns a moral may be doubted, but surely not his other suggestion that men are never true in their isolated self and the imagination is the faculty that brings before their mind and vision their own greater, infinite being. Corruption must utterly have destroyed human society before the appeal of such aesthetics can cease. The appeal carries with it a certain assurance, if not authority.

Angel of Surplus, art defines our humanity, socializes as well as draws us ever upward and onward. Mark of our true becoming, it is
the heart-land of culture and community. Of such things only a poet's
tongue can speak:

O Beauty, ever hallowed be thy name;
Thy will be done, thy kingdom come in flame
No other god be honoured next to thee.
To see thee once and feel thee is enough,
Though death at once our life's small candle snuff.
No matter. Highest bliss was given to us.
RABINDRANATH TAGORE

The following nine poems have been chosen from the forty-eight poems in William Radice's Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore, to be published by Penguin in May, 1985. The book as a whole is designed to give, for the first time, an impression of the full range of Tagore's poetry. Songs are not included. Tagore himself rated his 2500 songs highest among his achievements — and many of his own translations are of songs, not poems; but the poems below show how high and far he could fly when free of the linguistic and formal conventions of his songs. These new translations aim not only at verbal accuracy but also at truth to the form and style of the Bengali originals. The humane vividness of Broken Song, the grandeur of Shah-Jahan, the revealing informality of The Sick-Bed — 6 are but three of the many modes that have to be distinguished by the translator of Tagore. Full notes to all the poems, an Introduction and a Glossary will be supplied in the Penguin volume. The dates given here at the end of each poem refer to the year of publication of the Bengali volumes in which they first appeared.

Unending Love

I seem to have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times,  
In life after life, in age after age forever.  
My spell-bound heart has made and re-made the necklace of songs  
That you take as a gift, wear round your neck in your many forms  
In life after life, in age after age forever.

Whenever I hear old chronicles of love, its age-old pain,  
Its ancient tale of being apart or together,  
As I stare on and on into the past, in the end you emerge  
Clad in the light of a pole-star piercing the darkness of time:  
You become an image of what is remembered forever.
You and I have floated here on the stream that brings from the fount
At the heart of time love of one for another.
We have played alongside millions of lovers, shared in the same
Shy sweetness of meeting, the same distressful tears of farewell –
Old love, but in shapes that renew and renew forever.

Today it is heaped at your feet, it has found its end in you,
The love of all man’s days both past and forever:
Universal joy, universal sorrow, universal life,
The memories of all loves merging with this one love of ours –
And the songs of every poet past and forever.

Broken Song

Kāśīnāth the new young singer fills the hall with sound:
The seven notes dance in his throat like seven tame birds.
His voice is a sharp sword slicing and thrusting everywhere,
It darts like lightning – no knowing where it will go when.
He sets deadly traps for himself, then cuts them away:
The courtiers listen in amazement, give frequent gasps of praise.
Only the old king Pratāp Rāy sits like wood, unmoved.
Baraj Lāl is the only singer he likes, all others leave him cold.
From childhood he has spent so long listening to him sing –
Rāg Kāfī during holi, cloud-songs during the rains,
Songs for Durgā at dawn in autumn, songs to bid her farewell –
His heart swelled when he heard them and his eyes swam with tears.
And on days when friends gathered and filled the hall
There were cowherds’ songs of Kṛṣṇa, in rāgs Bhūpālī and Mūltān.

So many nights of wedding-festivity have passed in that royal house:
Servants dressed in red, hundreds of lamps alight;
The bridegroom sitting shyly in his finery and jewels,
Young friends teasing him and whispering in his ear:
Before him, singing rāg Sāhanā, sits Baraj Lāl.
The king’s heart is full of all those days and songs.
When he hears some other singer, he feels no chord inside,
No sudden magical awakening of memories of the past.
When Pratāp Rāy watches Kāśīnāth he just sees his wagging head:
Tune after tune after tune, but none with any echo in the heart.
Kāśīnāth asks for a rest and the singing stops for a space.
Pratāp Rāy smilingly turns his eyes to Baraj Lāl.
He puts his mouth to his ear and says, ‘Dear Ustād,
Give us a song as songs ought to be, this is no song at all.
It’s all tricks and games, like a cat hunting a bird.
We used to hear songs in the old days, today they have no idea.’

Old Baraj Lāl, white-haired, white turban on his head,
Bows to the assembled courtiers and slowly takes his seat.
He takes the tānpurā in his wasted, heavily veined hand
And with lowered head and closed eyes begins rāg Yaman-kalyān.
His quavering voice is swallowed by the enormous hall,
It is like a tiny bird in a storm, unable to fly for all it tries.

Pratāp Rāy, sitting to the left, encourages him again and again:
‘Superb, bravo!’ he says in his ear, ‘sing out loud.’

The courtiers are inattentive: some whisper amongst themselves,
Some of them yawn, some doze, some go off to their rooms;
Some of them call to servants, ‘Bring the hookah, bring some pān.’
Some fan themselves furiously and complain of the heat.
They cannot keep still for a minute, they shuffle or walk about –
The hall was quiet before, but every sort of noise has grown.
The old man’s singing is swamped, like a frail boat in a typhoon:
Only his shaky fingering of the tānpurā shows it is there.
Music that should rise on its own joy from the depths of the heart
Is crushed by heedless clamour, like a fountain under a stone.
The song and Baraj Lāl’s feelings go separate ways,
But he sings for all he is worth, to keep up the honour of his king.

One of the verses of the song has somehow slipped from his mind.
He quickly goes back, tries to get it right this time.
Again he forgets, it is lost, he shakes his head at the shame;
He starts the song at the beginning – again he has to stop.
His hand trembles doubly as he prays to his teacher’s name.
His voice quakes with distress, like a lamp guttering in a breeze.
He abandons the words of the song and tries to salvage the tune,
But suddenly his wide-mouthed singing breaks into loud cries.
The intricate melody goes to the winds, the rhythm is swept away –
Tears snap the thread of the song, cascade like pearls.
In shame he rests his head on the old tānpurā in his lap –
He has failed to remember a song: he weeps as he did as a child.
With brimming eyes King Pratāp Rāy tenderly touches his friend:
‘Come, let us go from here,’ he says with kindness and love.
They leave that festive hall with its hundreds of blinding lights.
The two old friends go outside, holding each other's hands.

Baraj says with hands clasped, 'Master, our days are gone. New men have come now, new styles and customs in the world. The court we kept is deserted – only the two of us are left. Don't ask anyone to listen to me now, I beg you at your feet, my lord. The singer alone does not make a song, there has to be someone who hears: One man opens his throat to sing, the other sings in his mind; Only when waves fall on the shore do they make a harmonious sound; Only when breezes shake the woods do we hear a rustling in the leaves. Only from a marriage of two forces does music arise in the world. Where there is no love, where listeners are dumb, there never can be song.'

[1894]

New Rain

It dances today, my heart, like a peacock it dances, it dances.
   It sports a mosaic of passions
   Like a peacock's tail,
   It soars to the sky with delight, it quests, O wildly

It dances today, my heart, like a peacock it dances.

Storm-clouds roll through the sky, vaunting their thunder, their thunder.
   Rice-plants bend and sway
   As the water rushes,
   Frogs croak, doves huddle and tremble in their nests, O proudly
   Storm-clouds roll through the sky, vaunting their thunder.

Rain-clouds wet my eyes with their blue collyrium, collyrium.
   I spread out my joy on the shaded
   New woodland grass,
   My soul and kadamba-trees blossom together, O coolly
   Rain-clouds wet my eyes with their blue collyrium.

Who wanders high on the palace-tower, hair unravelled, unravelled – Pulling her cloud-blue sari Close to her breast?
Who gambols in the shock and flame of the lightning, O who is it High on the tower today with hair unravelled?
Who sits in the reeds by the river in pure green garments, green garments?
   Her water-pot drifts from the bank
   As she scans the horizon,
Longing, distractedly chewing fresh jasmine, O who is it
Sitting in the reeds by the river in pure green garments?

Who swings on that bakul-tree branch today in the wilderness, wilderness –
   Scattering clusters of blooms,
   Sari-hem flying,
Hair unplaited and blown in her eyes? O to and fro
High and low swinging, who swings on that branch in the wilderness?

Who moors her boat where ketaki-trees are flowering, flowering?
   She has gathered moss in the loose
   Fold of her sari,
Her tearful rain-songs capture my heart, O who is it
Moored to the bank where ketaki-trees are flowering?

It dances today, my heart, like a peacock it dances, it dances.
   The woods vibrate with cicadas,
   Rain soaks leaves,
The river roars nearer and nearer the village, O wildly
It dances today, my heart, like a peacock it dances.

Death-Wedding

Why do you speak so softly, Death, Death,
Creep upon me, watch me so stealthily?
This is not how a lover should behave.
When evening flowers droop upon their tired
Stems, when cattle are brought in from the fields
After a whole day’s grazing, you, Death,
Death, approach me with such gentle steps,
Settle yourself immovably by my side.
I cannot understand the things you say.
Alas, will this be how you will take me, Death, 
Death? Like a thief, laying heavy sleep
On my eyes as you descend to my heart?
Will you thus let your tread be a slow beat
In my sleep-numbed blood, your jingling ankle-bells
A drowsy rumble in my ear? Will you, Death,
Death, wrap me, finally, in your cold
Arms and carry me away while I dream?
I do not know why you thus come and go.

Tell me, is this the way you wed, Death,
Death? Unceremonially, with no
Weight of sacrament or blessing or prayer?
Will you come with your massy tawny hair
Unkempt, unbound into a bright coil-crown?
Will no one bear your victory-flag before
Or after; will no torches glow like red
Eyes along the river, Death, Death?
Will earth not quake in terror at your step?

When fierce-eyed Śiva came to take his bride,
Remember all the pomp and trappings, Death,
Death: the flapping tiger-skins he wore;
His roaring bull; the serpents hissing round
His hair; the bom-bom sound as he slapped his cheeks;
The necklace of skulls swinging round his neck;
The sudden raucous music as he blew
His horn to announce his coming—was this not
A better way of wedding, Death, Death?

And as that deathly wedding-party's din
Grew nearer, Death, Death, tears of joy
Filled Gaurī's eyes and the garments at her breast
Quivered; her left eye fluttered and her heart
Pounded; her body quailed with thrilled delight
And her mind ran away with itself, Death, Death;
Her mother wailed and smote her head at the thought
Of receiving so wild a groom; and in his mind
His father agreed calamity had struck.

Why must you always come like a thief, Death,
Death, always silently, at night's end,
Leaving only tears? Come to me festively,
Make the whole night ring with your triumph, blow
Your victory-conch, dress me in blood-red robes,
Grasp me by the hand and sweep me away!
Pay no heed to what others may think, Death,
Death, for I shall of my own free will
Resort to you if you but take me gloriously.

If I am immersed in work in my room
When you arrive, Death, Death, then break
My work, thrust my unreadiness aside.
If I am sleeping, sinking all desires
In the dreamy pleasure of my bed, or if I lie
With apathy gripping my heart and my eyes
Flickering between sleep and waking, fill
Your conch with your destructive breath and blow,
Death, Death, and I shall run to you.

I shall go to where your boat is moored,
Death, Death, to the sea where the wind rolls
Darkness towards me from infinity.
I may see black clouds massing in the far
North-east corner of the sky; fiery snakes
Of lightning may rear up with their hoods raised,
But I shall not flinch in unfounded fear –
I shall pass silently, unswervingly
Across that red storm-sea, Death, Death.

[1903]
Shah-Jahan

You knew, Emperor of India, Shah-Jahan,
That life, youth, wealth, renown
All float away down the stream of time.
Your only dream
Was to preserve forever your heart's pain.
The harsh thunder of imperial power
Would fade into sleep
Like a sunset's crimson splendour,
But it was your hope
That at least a single, eternally-heaved sigh would stay
To grieve the sky.
Though emeralds, rubies, pearls are all
But as the glitter of a rainbow tricking out empty air
And must pass away,
Yet still one solitary tear
Would hang on the cheek of time
In the form
Of this white and gleaming Taj Mahal.

O human heart,
You have no time
To look back at anyone again,
No time.
You are driven by life's quick spate
On and on from landing to landing,
Loading cargo here,
Unloading there.
In your garden, the south wind's murmurs
May enchant spring madhabi-creepers
Into suddenly filling your quivering lap with flowers –
Their petals are scattered in the dust come twilight.
You have no time –
You raise from the dew of another night
New blossom in your groves, new jasmine
To dress with tearful gladness the votive tray
Of a later season.
O human heart,
All that you gather is thrown
To the edge of the path by the end of each night and day.
You have no time to look back again,
No time, no time.
Thus, Emperor, you wished,
Fearing your own heart's forgetfulness,
To conquer time's heart
Through beauty.
How wonderful the deathless clothing
With which you invested
Formless death – how it was garlanded!
You could not maintain
Your grief forever, and so you enmeshed
Your restless weeping
In bonds of silent perpetuity.
The names you softly
Whispered to your love
On moonlit nights in secret chambers live on
Here
As whispers in the ear of eternity.
The poignant gentleness of love
Flowered into the beauty of serene stone.

Poet-Emperor,
This is your heart's picture,
Your new Meghadūta,
Soaring with marvellous, unprecedented melody and line
Towards the unseen plane
On which your loverless beloved
And the first glow of sunrise
And the last sigh of sunset
And the disembodied beauty of moonlit cāmeli-flower
And the gateway on the edge of language
That turns away man's wistful gaze again and again
Are all blended.

This beauty is your messenger,
Skirting time's sentries
To carry the wordless message:
'I have not forgotten you, my love, I have not forgotten you.'

You are gone, now, Emperor –
Your empire has dissolved like a dream,
Your throne is shattered,
Your armies, whose marching
Shook the earth,
Today have no more weight than the windblown dust on the Delhi road.
Prisoners no longer sing for you;
Your musicians no longer mingle their tunes
With the lapping Jumna.
The jingle of the anklets of your women
Has died from your palaces:
The night sky moans
With the throb
Of crickets in their crumbling corners
But your tireless, incorruptible messenger,
Spurning imperial growth and decline,
Spurning the rise and fall of life and death,
Utters
Through the ages
The same, continuous message of eternal mourning:
'I have not forgotten you, my love, I have not forgotten you.'
Lies! Lies! Who says you have not forgotten?
Who says you have not thrown open
The cage that holds memory?
That even today your heart wards off
The ever-falling darkness
Of history?
That even today it has not escaped by the liberating path
Of forgetfulness?
Tombs remain forever with the dust of this earth:
It is death
That they carefully preserve in a casing of memory.
But who can hold life?
The stars claim it: they call it to the sky,
Invite it to new worlds, to the light
Of new dawns.
It breaks
The knot of memory and runs
Free along universal tracks.
Emperor, no earthly empire could ever keep you:
Not even the whole
Ocean-resounding natural world could supply you.
And so
When your life's commedia was complete
You kicked this world away
Like a used clay vessel.
You are greater than your fame: more and more of it is thrown
From your soul's chariot
As it journeys on:
Your relics lie here, but you are gone.
The love that could not move or carry forward,
The love that blocked its own road
With its own grand throne
Could adhere to you no more than the dust of a road on your feet
For all its intimate sweetness –
And thus
You returned it to the dust behind you,
And grief's seed,
Blown by your heart's feeling,
Was shed from the garland of your life.
You travelled on afar:
The deathless plant that grew
From that seed to meet the sky
Speaks to us now with sombre melody –
'Stare no matter how distantly,
That traveller is no longer here, no longer here.
His beloved kept him not,
His realms released him,
Neither sea nor mountain could bar him.
Today his chariot
Travels at the beck of the night
To the song of the stars
Towards the seat of dawn.
I remain here weighted with memory:
He is free of burdens; he is no longer here.'

I saw, in the twilight of flagging consciousness,
My body floating down an ink-black stream
With its mass of feelings, with its varied emotion,
With its many-coloured life-long store of memories,
With its flutesong. And as it drifted on and on
Its outlines dimmed; and among familiar tree-shaded
Villages on the banks, the sounds of evening
Worship grew faint, doors were closed, lamps
Were covered, boats were moored to the ghāts. Crossings
From either side of the stream stopped; night thickened;
From the forest-branches fading birdsong offered
Self-sacrifice to a huge silence.
Dark formlessness settled over all diversity
Of land and water. As shadow, as particles, my body
Fused with endless night. I came to rest
At the altar of the stars. Alone, amazed, I stared
Upwards with hands clasped and said: 'Sun, you have removed
Your rays: show now your loveliest, kindliest form
That I may see the Person who dwells in me as in you.'

1938

In the Eyes of a Peacock

The terrace where I sit is screened
From the midsummer dawn sunshine.
What a boon to have leisure—
No pressing tasks crowding in upon me yet;
No hordes of people pestering me,
Trampling over my time.
I sit and write:
The sweetness of a free morning collects in my pen-nib
Like the juice that drips from a slit in a date-palm.

Our peacock has come to sit on the railing next to me,
Tail spread downwards.
He finds safe refuge with me—
No unkind keeper comes to him here with shackles.
Outside, unripe mangoes dangle from branches;
Lemon trees are loaded with lemons;
A single kurī-tree seems surprised
By its excess of flowers.
The peacock bends his head to this side and that
With unthinking natural restlessness.
His detached stare
Pays not the slightest attention to the marks in my note-book.
If the letters were insects he would look:
He would not then regard a poet as utterly useless.
I smile at the peacock's solemn indifference,
Observe my writing through his eyes;
And indeed the same aloofness
Is in the entire blue sky,
In every leaf of the tree that is hung with green mangoes,
In the buzzing of the wild bee-hive in our tamarind-tree.
I reflect that in ancient Mohenjodaro,
On a similarly idle late Caitra morning,  
A poet must have written poems,  
And universal nature took no account whatsoever.  
The peacock is still to be found in the balance-sheet of life,  
And green mangoes still hang from branches;  
Their value in the gamut of nature from blue sky to green woods  
Will not diminish at all.
But the poet of Mohenjodaro is completely excluded  
From the wayside grass, from the dark night's fireflies.

I expand my consciousness  
Into endless time and vast earth;  
I absorb the huge detachment of nature's own meditations  
Into my own mind;  
I regard the letters in my note-book  
As autumnal flocks of insects -  
I conclude that if I were to tear out the pages today  
I would merely be advancing the ultimate cremation awaiting them anyway.

Suddenly I hear a voice –  
'Grandfather, are you writing?'  
Someone else has come – not a peacock this time  
But Sunayani, as she is called in the house,  
But whom I call Sunāyanī because she listens so well.  
She has the right to hear my poems before anyone else.  
I reply, 'This won't appeal to your sensitive ears:  
It's vers libre.'  
A wave of furrows plays across her forehead –  
'I'll put up with it,' she says,  
Then adds a little flattery:  
'Prose, when you recite it,  
Can take on the colour of poetry.'  
And she throws her arms round my neck and hugs me.
I quip, 'Are you trying to transfer some of that poetic colour  
From my throat into your arms?'
She answers, 'That's not how a poet should talk:  
I'm the one who passes the touch of poetry into your voice:  
I may even have awoken song.'

I listen in silence, too happy to reply.  
I say to myself – The aloofness of nature  
Is constant, like a mountain it looks down loftily  
From numberless accumulated years.  
But my Sunāyanī,
Morning star,
Can lightly and suddenly scale its immensity;
And time's great disregard surrenders to that instant.

Poet of Mohenjodaro, your evening star
Has passed through its setting
To surmount again the crest of morning
Here in my life.

New Birth

New deliverer –
The new age eagerly looks
To the path of your coming.
What message have you brought
To the world? In the mortal arena
What seat has been prepared for you?
What new form of address
Have you brought to be used
In the worship of God in Man? What song of heaven
Have you heard before coming?
What great weapon for the fighting of evil
Have you placed in the quiver, bound to the waist
Of the young warrior?
Will you, perhaps, where a tide of blood besmirches your path,
Where there is malice and discord,
Construct a dam of peace,
A place of meeting and pilgrimage?
Who can say if there is written on your forehead
The invisible mark
Of the triumph of some great striving?
Today we search for your unwritten name:
You seem to be just off the stage,
Like an imminent star of morning.
Infants bring again and again
A message of reassurance –
They seem to promise deliverance, light, dawn.
O my day-break sparrow—
In my last moments of sleepiness,
While there is still some darkness,
Here you are tapping on my window-slats,
Asking for news
And then dancing and twittering
Just as your whim takes you.
Your pluckily bobbing tail
Cocks a snook at all restrictions.
When magpie-robins chirrup at dawn,
Poets tip them.
When a hidden cuckoo hoots all day
Its same unvarying fifth,
So high is its rating
It gets the applause of Kalidasa
Ahead of all other birds.
You couldn't care less—
You never keep to the scale—
To enter Kalidasa's room
And chatter
And mess up his metres
Amuses you greatly.
Whenever you perch on a pillar
At the court of King Vikramaditya
And bards spout,
What are their songs to you?
You are closer to the poet's mistress:
You happily join in her round-the-clock prattle.
You do not dance
Under contract from the Spring—
You strut
Any old how, no discipline at all.
You do not turn up politely
At woodland singing-contests;
You gossip with the light in broad vernacular—
Its meaning
Is not in the dictionary—
Only your own throbbing little chest
Knows it.

Slanting your neck to right or left,
How you play about—
So busy all day for no apparent reason,
Scrabbling at the ground,
Bathing in the dust—
You are so unkempt
The dirt doesn’t show on you, worry you at all.
You build your nest in the corner of the ceiling
Of even a king’s chamber,
You are so utterly brazen.

Whenever I spend painful, sleepless nights,
I always look forward
To your first tap-tap at my door.
The brave, nimble, simple
Life’s message that you bring—
Give it to me,
That the sunlight by which all creatures dwell
May call me,
O my day-break sparrow.

[1940]
Free paraphrases of 100 Poems of Kabir, translated by Tagore and Evelyn Underhill. (The numbers given are from that book). Published in Quaker Monthly, 1976.

16
Between conscious and unconscious
All beings, all worlds
Swing–
Sun, moon, stars, earth,
All ages east and west,
King, prophet, beggar–
This rhythm defeats time.
Lord, you take form
In love.

9
How can I tell what he is?
No image does it.
‘He is in me’ dims bright worlds with shame;
‘He is outside’ kills with a lie.
He unites in and out,
Thought and depths below thought–
Seen and unseen,
Neither veiled nor revealed,
Beyond and behind language.

4
Do not go out
To the garden.
Flowers dance within
You, timelessly.

38
Error locked the door.
Love opens it.
Inside wakes one you seek.
Why pass by?
Is it not high time that people (including members of his own family) stopped playing fast and loose with Richard Wagner's music-dramas and returned, in principle and in detail, to the clearly indicated intentions of the Master himself? One is thinking chiefly of the production side of these dramas, since nowadays on the purely musical side an excellent average prevails both orchestrally and vocally. A ranting Heldentenor is almost a thing of the past, words are clearly heard and the sung dialogue is often as full of subtle inflections as in a well acted play on the spoken stage.

Not so, however, with the production: during recent decades all kinds of uncalled for innovations have been introduced in pursuit of a bogus originality, often taking the form of deliberately suppressing various objects referred to in the text and without which the action becomes obscure or even unintelligible. If one protests one is apt to be told that 'we do not wish to go back to Victorian fussiness and literalism on the stage': to which the answer is easy, namely that fussiness, whether Victorian or even 20th Century, is certainly to be avoided and that a too naturalistic handling of scenic details, in the mode of 'socialist realism', is undesirable precisely because it detracts from the mythical and heroic setting Wagner wished to give to his plays. For the same reason it is a fundamental mistake to try and reduce these symbolic stories to purely psychological proportions, as if they were intended as modern 'problem-plays' in disguise. It is not concealed, however, by advocates of an all-psychological approach to Wagner that such in fact is their aim; they are out to devalue, to the point of elimination, whatever is suggestive of the godlike or the heroic in Wagner's characters and what is left? — a collection of rather unconvincing human beings playing a myth that no longer explains itself for want of the proper framework. Both the profounder truths of the symbolism the composer took over from the old stories he treated
and the noble qualities he infused into so many of his characters disappear in a welter of petty sentimentality and humanistic propaganda. The whole stature of these marvellous dramas is belittled in consequence.

One of the most important weapons in Wagner's dramatic armoury is his confrontation of attitudes, as between different kinds of beings, gods, giants, earth-dwarfs and human heroes. This fact is generally recognized: from which it surely follows that when producing these dramas everything possible should be done to heighten, not diminish, the sense of contrast and this is where the recognisable attributes of the various characters count for so much: with all symbolical portraiture this is an essential feature. It is sheer loss when the Walküre is brought in minus her armour or when Wotan, who needs every inch of stature one can give him, is deprived of his helmet. Nor is it a gain when Gunther, who is supposed to be the head of a noble clan though feeble as a person (the part depends on this inconsistency of character), is made to look and behave like some low-born ruffian or when Hunding, that harsh warrior, appears in the guise of an improbable cave-man.

In a performance some years ago at Covent Garden one of the most moving scenes in the whole Ring, the encounter of Waltraute and Brunhilde in Act I, Scene 3 of Götterdämmerung was largely spoiled by the fact that Waltraute, the character who still was and thought like a Walküre, was no longer recognizable as such because of the absence of her traditional equipment; consequently the duet became one between two pathetic women, with the result that Brunhilde had all too easy work in dominating the scene; the tension arising from the opposition of two clearly contrasted types was no longer felt. One could hardly find a better illustration of the essential usefulness of visual attributes and of the loss in power of dramatic suggestion due to their suppression.

This is one example of how a departure from Wagnerian precedent can ruin a scene, but here is another: in Act I of Walküre some years ago one saw Hunding's homestead reduced to an open stockade surrounding the tree, with the sleeping quarters represented by a nondescript sort of cave at one side — whatever can have induced the directors of the opera at that time to sanction this gratuitous disregard of Wagner's stage directions? When Wagner said a house built round a central tree,
surely he meant a house and nothing else. The most ludicrous thing about the performance using those sets was when Siegmund, seeking shelter from the furious storm so vividly indicated by the orchestra, entered the stockade and settled down on the bearskin hearthrug before Hunding's unflickering electric fire though it was perfectly evident that the rain must have been driving in from all four open sides!

In the same act another self-defeating innovation was introduced when the door that should fly open at the supreme moment of Siegmund and Sieglinde's duet, showing the wood outside bathed in spring moonlight, was done away with, and by whose warrant, one is minded to ask, seeing that Wagner's instructions clearly indicate a door? Hitherto, when these instructions have been observed, this moment has invariably marked a dramatic climax. The expedient is simple, but it works unfailingly; why try to change it? One can only plead with those who have the final say in these matters not to let themselves any longer be stampeded, through a fear of being labelled (falsely labelled) 'reactionary', into accepting changes of an arbitrary kind like the ones instanced above. Fidelity to Wagner's wishes can never become synonymous with a blind conservatism, unless it be accompanied by unintelligence in execution, thus belying the intention. If ever there was an artist whose work forms a consistent whole and who explained what he wanted at every turn that man was Richard Wagner. This means that his work, in order to live again for each fresh generation, has to be recreated without tampering with the form, with which its spirit is intimately bound up. To translate the composer's wishes intelligently into practice is already a sufficient challenge to any producer's genuine inventiveness.

Another flagrant departure from Wagner's intention and which disembowels what is perhaps the greatest single scene in the whole of opera, is the latter-day treatment of Brunhilde's funeral oration over the murdered Siegfried: how could her words preserve their full meaning when (a) there was neither funeral pyre nor heroic corpse to be seen and (b) when there was no stage audience to frame her appeal? Instead of this, all one saw was a lone woman in the middle of the floorboards of Covent Garden opera-house haranguing endlessly, with her every allusion rendered pointless for want of visible supports: as a result this scene became 'sterilised' almost out of existence. In the classical rendering of the opera the building of the pyre, the applying
to it by Brunhilde of the fatal torch and all that follows are dramatic assets that it is folly to discard. In one production I remember, Brunhilde's unaccountable gesture of picking up a torchlike object from somewhere or other and casting it away backstage (following which smoke appeared) marked an acme of absurdity in a performance which, despite worthy singing and orchestral playing, ended in bathos due, almost entirely, to disregarding Wagner's expressed wishes.

Though nowadays the word 'beautiful' has become almost unmentionable when discussing artistic matters, I shall make bold to introduce it here, seeing that it is not foreign to Wagner's own thoughts about his art. By comparison with the sets designed for operas by other composers such as Verdi, for instance, those allotted to Wagner in recent years have, on average, been distressingly ugly; a scene where the eye was gratified, as well as the ear, has been rare indeed. Casting one's memory back to the scenic background provided at certain Ring performances in Munich between the wars, one is conscious of the fact that those sets, in comparison with the calculated drabness of more recent productions, were both beautiful and better fitted to the action. The scenery was certainly on simpler and bolder lines than what would have prevailed in Wagner's own day, yet there was no assertive departure from the older conception. But whatever the style, it should not lack beauty whether of form or colour; what we have too often been given has been both hideous and meaningless as well. It goes without saying that what we may reasonably hope to see revived is not the luxurious type of scenery that 19th century bourgeois taste hankered after. We should do better than that, not only because our lighting resources open up various possibilities unknown at that time, but also because a certain predilection for austerer models is a gain on the stage, always provided it be not turned into a cult of reticence which, in its own way, masks the essential quite as much as did the previous discursiveness.

An excellent example of how a Wagnerian music-drama can be handled in a freer idiom was provided some years ago by the Covent Garden production of Parsifal with Weingartner conducting—a memorable experience if ever there was one. No one could have accused it of naturalistic bias, though in all essential details Wagner's stage directions were strictly adhered to. The aim was fully achieved of
providing scenery to fit the action and to create, by its suggestive design, the appropriate background for that particular story. Though those sets were quite different from anything Wagner could have imagined, one felt that his wishes had here been given full effect, with the result that the opera had a wholeness that one would gladly see realized in the Ring with equal success. But we are still waiting for this to happen.

To turn to a quite different occasion: when the Hamburg Opera Company came to play Lohengrin at Sadlers Wells, in the final scene when the young Duke of Brabant reappeared in his true form he was made to saunter down a flight of stairs while Lohengrin, for his part, remained at the top with his back ostentatiously turned to the audience; for sheer undramatic pretentiousness one would have to go far to find the equal of this mishandling of the final curtain.

In contrast to this fiasco, when Lohengrin was given at Covent Garden at a somewhat later date that same scene was handled with admirable effect on lines that were at once traditional and indefinably fresh. As the Swan dipped and the young duke appeared, Elsa and all the other actors did the natural thing by rushing towards him, thus taking their attention (and ours) momentarily off the hero himself who just before, while singing his last song, had been the focus of all eyes; in that brief instant Lohengrin quietly stepped on to his boat and was lost from sight. The next moment the people on the stage, and we with them, came to their senses but it was too late; he had gone for good, and one could almost share with them their view of the tiny figure in the boat receding into the distance. A splendid piece of stagecraft in its way, and the fact that it agreed with common sense in no way counts against it; an obsessive avoidance of the obvious, in Wagner, is in fact a form of that very fussiness which, so we are told (and agree), ought at all costs to be avoided.

The principal argument put forward by advocates of an abstract treatment of Wagner's operas is a would-be philosophical one, namely, that by leaving out all that savours of the topical or historical from these masterpieces their timeless universality will be enhanced. Apart from the speciousness of such an argument, it cannot possibly be put into effect without involving one in inconsistencies and illogi-calities of a blatant kind. For the proposed method of expurgation to work, it would in fact be necessary to eliminate from Wagner's
text the countless references whereby the action is situated in a particular time and place; while these references remain in the sung words, what purpose is served by trying to shed them at the visual level only? All that results is a weakening of the connection between the various elements that together have gone into the forming of this closely knit and polyvalent Wagnerian art. Wagner's own ideas on the subject are so well known that one wonders whatever possessed his grandson or any other producer to substitute a quite alien conception and method.

In reality the conception of an art and the technical means demanded for its realization are inseparable: if you have the right technique you have the style, and vice versa. These are not two things, but two ways of regarding the same thing. Whatever the nature of an artistic creation, this can become actualised only through the medium (taking this word in its widest sense) imparted to it by the artist who conceived and carried out the idea: the word must be made flesh — such flesh and not other — before it can speak to our understanding. The more strictly (which does not mean pedantically) the form and intimate texture of a work of art are respected the more surely its message will reach the expectant mind. Moreover, the more universal the message, the more intimately it is wedded to its means of formal expression: it is the more diffuse and superficial works with which liberties may be taken, but not the supreme masterpieces.

People would simply laugh were one to suggest that, in a great painting, concrete features such as architecture, clothes, natural landscape or whatever else the painter chose to include could be altered in order to leave there only the pure essence — who in the world has ever beheld a naked essence? Why then should this be deemed possible in the case of Wagner's music-dramas, as if the details he laid down amounted to expendable irrelevancies? Attempts to read into his compositions a too abstract sense kill them in the name of a perfectly spurious universalism.

Apart from arguments with a tendentiously logical appeal, the self-appointed tamperers with the Ring have also sought a supposedly moralistic justification for their barbarous innovations by dragging in the name of Hitler; since Hitler in his own way loved Wagner, so it is argued, we must find another way to present the great Epic which will differ from Hitler's taste as much as possible, even if the music itself
remains the same as what he listened to. For this purpose a ready-to-hand expedient is to multiply stage gimmicks of all kinds. To cite one recent example, the incident in the second act of Gotterdammerung when Gunther leads in his unwilling bride to meet his sister Gutrune for the wedding ceremony in front of the expectant vassals lost most of its tragic power from the fact that Brunhilde did not, as had been usual, come in sad but still dignified as fitted her celestial antecedents; on the contrary, she presented us with a picture of abject collapse as Gunther half-dragged her along beside him. His intended words of welcome so marvellously set by the composer – perhaps the most moving moment in all Opera – thus became quite unconvincing. Brunhilde’s horror at seeing Siegfried coupled with his failure to recognise her, and the outraged heroine’s vengeful oath with all that follows, lost much of their power to enlist the audience’s sympathetic horror.

When discussing the present subject it is always important to bear in mind the fact that if at the present time ‘Art’ represents one of the chief remaining vehicles for the spiritual aspirations of mankind in the West – Temenos exists in order to serve this purpose – the diabolical powers, ‘Alberich in our midst’ do not remain idle. An important weapon in their armoury is to develop a ‘Counter-art’ whereby genuine masterpieces inherited from the past can be got to part company both from good taste and intelligence. Tamely to tolerate these satanic suggestions is a sin urgently calling for metanoia extending to both thought and action, but such a metanoia is incompatible with an attitude of defeatism.

The examples I have cited from my own experience are surely shocking enough as they stand; but in fact the same tendencies have lately been carried to unimaginable lengths – who could have even dreamed of a Wotan dressed in a frock-coat, yet many such abominations have been reported in the Press both from Germany and in this country. Enough of nightmarish horrors! If Wagner’s glorious art is to be tortured thus, it would be kinder to relegate it to oblivion.

Unexpectedly the year 1983, which happened to be the centenary of Wagner’s death, has provided some grounds for hope. When planning the Bayreuth festival performances, it was decided to return to a much more strict observance of Wagner’s own instructions; moreover, reports in the Press spoke of an enthusiastic response on the part of the audience. Is this the turn of the tide? Let us pray that such is the case.
Helped by this precedent let the plea be made for a radical rethinking of this whole question of Wagnerian production, based on the principle that wherever the author himself has given clear instructions they should be followed. It is by the way we carry out those instructions that our originality can best be measured; their arbitrary disregard can only lead to an unoriginal stultification.

Let us be prepared to scrap existing sets and stage arrangements and start again after refreshing our minds at the source, by an unprejudiced study of all the evidence that earlier productions of Wagner can afford us; they have much to tell us even now and even when, in some cases, they strike us as needlessly elaborate in respect of minor details; in any case, this defect is easily remedied.

'Back to Wagner and his instructions' spells no retrogressive motive; on the contrary, it expresses the primary logical condition for recreating his work today or indeed for recreating any work of art belonging to a period other than one's own; it is almost a trite saying that if the appropriate formal conditions are disregarded the spirit itself will elude us, whether one is dealing with Bach or Wagner or anyone you please. This is as true of the dramatic requirements as of the more purely musical ones, for Wagner's is a composite art, a synthesis whose unity depends upon the observance of all the formal conditions he laid down, not of some while ignoring others.

If after the War his beloved German homeland, for reasons we need not discuss further, became for a time the scene of a terrible series of perversions of Wagner's music-dramas, with the rest of Europe tamely following suit, this is no reason why here in England a fresh lead should not be given into the path of return to the Centre; for us, our symbolical centre in this respect may well be the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. We have surely had our lesson in what happens as a result of heavy-handed tampering with the art of a Master who, perhaps more than all others, knew his own mind.
Scholars have called Kalidasa ‘the Shakespeare of Sanskrit literature’ and his play Shakuntala is still performed by traditional Indian players. Though his works are known, the dates and circumstances of his life are uncertain: he is thought to have lived at some time between 50 B.C. and the first half of the sixth century. ‘The Meghaduta or Cloud Messenger relates how a Yaksha, servant of Cùvera the God of Wealth, having incurred divine displeasure by neglecting a garden, is banished to the mountain of Ramagiri. At the opening of the poem he is supposed to have passed eight months in solitary exile. Seeing a cloud passing northward, in his grief he requests it to convey a message to his wife in Alaca.’ (T. Holme, Introduction to Shakuntala or the Fatal Ring tr. Sir William Jones – Works 1799 – London 1902.) The poem can be read on many levels. Harold Morland writes:

If I understand Kalidasa at all, underneath The Cloud Messenger there is a desperate hope. The German ‘Weltschmertz’ is not the same. That is weariness past all hope; but Kalidasa’s is a weariness into belief. George Herbert would have understood.

The poem consists of one hundred and fifteen stanzas of four lines each. Harold Morland has rendered these freely, and writes:

Indeed it would be insolent to pretend that the short poems that follow are in any sense a translation. They are ‘variations on an Indian theme’. They have as much ‘reality’ as an album of snapshots in comparison with the vibrant magnificence of the great Hindu temples. . . . Think of the carvings in the Louvre, where a few statues are offered as works of art, when their purpose and place was a monument of worship in a great cathedral of belief. So, at best, these lyrics are the memories of an experiencing mind. Kalidasa’s theme is the wholeness of life. My versions are simple variations on that theme.

The text is taken from a privately printed collection, My Seeking Spirit, which was published in 1966.
Siva Nataraja. Kachipura, 8th–9th century AD.
1
My seeking spirit failed. And in the dark
Of God's white curse I am condemned
To live where loneliness is stemmed
Dark-rooted . . .
Under that peak are bathing-places
Of Shiva with the many faces.
And heaven is breathing a lark.
Have you not heard the silence speak?

2
I endure under the hills. God bathes here
In my afternoon and night
When even the light
Is a quiet, cool Display on the pool,
And fear is the drifting leaves that fall,
And the flow is nothing, nothing, but yet all.

3
These heights of the mind. God, will you never know
How I want to blunder, lovingly, below?

4
That monstrous elephant on heat Can still thrust on towards its sweet Delirium . . .
I hear him pound In a very earthquake on this ground; and yet
What have I but a golden bracelet?
King,
give me grace if only of a dream.
My clouded heart,
If it breaks, breaks me apart
In hemispheres of ‘is’ and ‘seems’.

I look to the cloud.
Oh, not for a shower
But the birth of a flower,
And the dew
Of heaven thinking.
Is it true,
This darkness of the sky, this I, this I?

Build all your life on me.
This summer-time
I send you garlands of sweet hours.
Have you not prayed
Quietly, in a temple made
With petal-walls, and heard a prayer
Your breath, and God’s – yet only air?

I bend to the rose.
Its silence
Speaks what God above me knows.

One flower
A perfect hour;
One breath
And the world’s death.
10
I too can sing, my bird.
But if I have a word
From my own breath,
What does it mean but death?
And I've no wing.

11
This cloud,
and the light behind.
Must I be blind?
My eyes are awake.
I love this world.
Unfold,
White messenger of cloud,
the souled
From the unsouled.

12
Shapes and shapes torment me.
Changing sky . . .
Must I
Pray to an eternal truth?
Or waste my youth
In a lifetime of desire?
What power in me makes me inquire?

13
You have a thinking heart;
I have a word –
And on that branch is a bird.

14
If in the darkness I should cry,
What echo can I hear but 'I' and 'I'?
And yet I'd shape an other-world. I'd give
All this that makes me live
For some enduring flower . . .
I'd live in a stone
If time and change would leave me a minute alone.

I dream my God.
A greater power than mine
Awakes to the Divine.

But what can I do?
Ask the petalled rose
- Its sweetness is what ignorance knows.

I live in the dark.
But you that rejoice in the light
Have never known the splendour of a night.

And still I burn with the stars.
I breed like nenuphars
On a cold pool . . .
I shine.
When one moon-glance of the Divine
Shows me a fool,
Or some bright, witty school
Knows more than in my darkness I dare breathe,
I turn all to belief.
And I believe.

My arrogance is this,
not just my earth
But god-like, my strange miracle of birth.
The world I'm given . . . Hours
And the endlessness of flowers.
It's true
That I and you
Must die . . .
But look for God's sake in a human mind
And find the shape of God,
And find. And find.

21
I breathe in the air the breath of humankind.
And my exhausted mind
Must search, and search, till it grows blind.

22
But God surrounds me. Darkness is His eyes,
And the storm His enterprise
Into my blank of fear . . . And God surrounds me
Even when I seem alone.
Help me, my God, to resurrect this bone.

23
Cloud-Messenger, you climb
The fields of the sky, and bring a time
When travellers' wives can breathe the air,
And feel the pleasure of disordered hair.

24
Better to kneel in prayer
To Virtue, knowing that the air
Sighs that you're denied,
Than on your feet
Upstanding feel the heat
Of a slow Dullness, merely the fire
Of everyman's desire.
25
You are the ark where a smouldering soul –
Shrivelled, understands the whole.
Carry my message, Cloud.  Come down like rain
Not on my trivial pain,
But on the garden there.
               The garden there.

26
I am a burning soul.
   I reach for the ark
Of your cool body.
   Bless me in the dark.

27
A cloud surrounds me.  My bewildered mind
   Tells me, if I search I find.
               I find . . .

28
But in what treasury of love?
   Alaka – hoard
Of love concealed . . . One kiss, and the adored
   Burns bright
With all my body's, and my soul's delight.

29
Moon over Shiva,
   in the garden there
Are naked flowers, and now
   Dare I ask how
You prove to me that God Himself is bare?

30
Give me your rose.
   Give me your sleeping thighs.
And let birds sing.
   And men be wise.
31
Now in the night I ask who knows
The saintly budding of the rose.

32
If the grove there laughs, like the white teeth
Of a girl, with jasmine – and underneath
  His holiness an anchorite is stirred,
  How can a sinner speak an innocent word?

33
I see a rose.
  Its berries are red.
And love, exhausted, hangs his head.

34
Sing in the darkness.
  Gold my ears refine
From the ore of your deep meaning's mine;
  Yet even on the surface I assay
Your wealth of heart,
  eternally, today.

35
Vapour and light, both wind and water, a cloud –
  Have you not seen them proud
And charged with a message like God's breath?
  They flow through the air.
  They flow.
  And forever, after my private death,
  They'll know.

36
How shall I pray?
Since I must die,
Better to cry in vain
To the mind's and spirit's goodness than to gain
A dull content through never asking Why?
37
It moves in light,
and even in the dark
Is an ark
Half way to heaven.
Cloud-Messenger, lift up my heavy words
Whether by night or day
Past the power of birds,
And tell my God that I have striven.

38
Caress this mountain crag, and say
'You are my earth.
In you was my soul's birth . . .
And Rama,
Rama,
day by day
Mounts you with delight,
And in the night
Has only one black fear –
To find that you're not here.'

39
The soft air brings you. Slowly. There.
A rainbird sings his prayer
For your cool showers. And the breeding cranes
Will wait for you with all their delicate grace,
And even bless you for their pains,
Seeing their white existence reflected in your face.

40
You move across my heaven.
You blur my prayer
Only by being there.
And some
    and some  can worship the peak.
But can I speak
In this rare
    and refining air
Of the mounting feet of God?
How slowly I
Climb upward with 'Goodbye'.

I turn to the world,
and the seasons move
With a God's own truth I cannot prove.

I live in faith.
    I hear a quiet rose.
    But I am torn
By something there that grows
    In the mind of a thorn.

Yet the wind sits fair,
    and slowly, slowly brings
Your breath within its own.
    A rainbird sings
And its throat is desperate for the showers;
    And among the nodding flowers
The cranes at breeding-time
    Are dancing like white girls in heaven,
Or poise like the seven
Stars of the Pleiades.
    And my poor rhyme
Is an image of these.
But leave me now.
Better to hope alone
In living flesh than huddle against you
And feel only bone.

Thunder and rain can enrich the earth;
The royal swans can dip and sway.
On the holy lake they sigh
And pluck the lotus-roots, then fly
To the icy Himalayas.
Why?
These fellow-pilgrims of my soul
Need to know the worth
And the bearing of the Pole.

And some will turn their face to you
In holy simpleness, and see
How you and the heavens sweep,
And cry:
‘You’ll break the mountains of my earth!
And I
Have only this poor valley of my birth.’
Why should they weep
For what they’re meant to be?
One ‘me’ is true.

But you, Cloud-Messenger, can storm
The ramparts where the elephants guard
What men declare the ‘norm’,
And with soft dissolving rain disprove the hard.

Indra, Bender of the Bow,
From a mountain ant-hill in the east
Sends arrowing jewel-rays ... and now we know
That blackness of the beast
   Was one of the ways
That Vishnu in a cowherd's rags could hide
   His peacock-splendour.

   God,
the endless-eye’d.

Climb the crag of Mala.
   Even its stone
Is rosy in the dawn.
   And in a countrywoman’s eyes
– With their ignorant stare –
   You'll seem a god at sunrise;
       Just by being there.

   These eyes. Their earthly beauty
Cries
   That on you rests the duty
Of ploughing. Now!
   Come out the god within me.

   Forth,
And westward, eastward. And then north.

   Flood your burning forests. Then
In your weariness look up to Mango’s head,
   Cloud-crested.
   When you’re rested,
   And your lover’s contemplating him instead,
A quiet love will turn to you again.

   For the world is God’s eternal body. Even I
See something like Hesperides;
And there the fruit.
Your nipples. Why
Is there no glory greater than these
On the pearling skin of the sky?

53
The woodmen's wives have bowers there.
You ask me where?
Send down a shower, and then speed on,
Ignoring
What happens on our human flooring.

54
The lust of life. This rain
Again and again;
The flush of apple-blossom in a wind
And kissing flowers.

And you, Cloud-Messenger, within
(Not blaming one who sinned)
Have all the fertile showers . . .
I ask you — yours? or mine the sin?

55
And still the rain, the seed of heaven.
My body drinks.
Wild elephants of cloud,
You breed within me
As you breed within the rose
And on the gnarled, fantastic apple-boughs.

Now nothingness has power
To fertilize the hour
When the quiet soul must plead
And be
Not just itself, but even
Only the rain . . .
only the rain.
The dappled deer look up and see
The orange-blossom on the tree,
Then bend their heads to nuzzle in the sprouts
Of earth's delight.

No ecstasy.
But their cool snouts
Are breathing praise to the rain's soft night.

If I could travel with a cloud — if I could bear
The love I have in the highest air,
You still — being cloud — would pause
Because . . . because
You come upon a peak.

(Nor can I speak
Of my love's altitude, but stay
And whitely pray).

I watch the burning bush below,
And know
Out of this fire you'll make a harvest grow.

Move in the air. You are my day's
White praise
Of the body's beauty . . . When a mountain stays
Your drifting pride
You ride
A flowering field.

And in between the birds,
My airless words

But when you fill the sky, and your rain
Turns the leaves over again,
The holy fig-trees
(Villages of life)
Are again awake to the strife.
Of housing crows.
And I
Feed these
With my oblation of bread, and pray
That the wild swan knows
I have a nesting-ground, for birth
Of any 'these' and 'those',
Content in love to be their earth.

But still to a king-town, still
To a capital of love you move in the air,
And there
Fulfill
Delight and pain.
And an out-of-heaven grace
Touches your reflecting face.

You'll not deny me,
Cloud, you'll not deny
— After I'm lifted to the sky —
Exhausted I may lie
And kiss the comeliness of earth,
And praise the worth
Of a harlot-joy, despised
By all who've never known how you are prized.

The jasmine in my garden is white stars.
Not heaven has so much scent
I walk alone from the particulars
Of the absolute within you,
And invent
Heaven and the jasmine,
love,
myself and you
Into something new.
Crowd your splendour tonight
    In all its white
    Over the gloom
    Of my dark room;
And be reflected in the eyes
    - Star-pointed - of my love that lies
And earth-believing in between my thighs.

A bird that sings in the rain . . .
The river like a girdle flows
Round a sleeping belly of earth,
    and I
Look on her eddying navel; and again
    Reply
With my lipping adoration of the rose.

But let your fingers dream among her hair
    And still explore
Those lands of her you knew before
    And yet you wonder 'Where?'

And yet those eyes.
    Could I devise
An endlessness of rhyme, I'd not surprise -
    From 'wise'
To the casual question of 'surmise',
    On to the pain that cries
With 'God! God! God!' when a lover dies -
    Truth into lies
In the eternal and returning rhyme of those two eyes.

But the morning chatter of birds,
    Is it words? (My words?)
Or do they without meaning sing?
    Are they the ring
Round the ankle of the river flowing
Stumbling over the stones, not knowing
Where she is going, stealing
    Through the dark earth's feeling?
    And who can be wise
To what a bird cries?

68

The stream is the flow of her hair.
Not stars, her eyes
Are within their private heaven not divine,
    But shining mine
Make me my own astrologer wise
To know my life and time are fortuned there.

69

But in my darkness, who but I
    Should cry?
    And who'd know why
    But I?

70

Though all this majesty of stars
    Speaks an eternal truth,
What am I left with, but the scars
    Of my dying youth?
Give me eternity!
    Give me one breath.
Through the cold and subtle smiling lips of death.

71

This stone. This temple-shape of life,
The fabric of our human strife—
    I worship here,
And still I pray
For one still moment's surcease from the fear
Of even this rose-and-birdsong-day.

The cranes are flying at the break of day,
And crying
Faintly like a heart in the sighing air
— Cool, lotus-scented —
But what does this daylight say
More than a lover who's lamented
Leaving the limbs he's loved, and bare
But there,
Still there?

Have you not seen the peacocks dip and sway
And dance in the light of day?
But who knows
When even the eyes of their feathers close
What I, as well as they,
Think of a rose?

But the dancers have grown tired, and each of the bells
Round their ankles tells
With a dying sound
That their wrists are weary of the fans.
No man's —
Not a king's delight —
Can offer more than the stillness of the night.

Now Shiva's arms — these branching arms of the trees
Uplifted — grip them in the white
And rising crescent of delight
In the smouldering ecstasies
Of sunset, of that western rose,
HAROLD MORLAND

Answer my questioning prose
With the poems of your stars—
though stars are lees
Of your fermenting wine,
And I drink God within me. Purely mine.

And let the lovers go. Let day's hot lies
Never contradict the thighs.
That slept and dreamed;
For the flesh is often wise,
And 'is' deceives more than what 'seemed'.

And in the pool
And I that fool
White-faced — the reflection there
Of nothing staring?
Or is this troubled water,
YOU condensed,
My cloud in heaven, and by me sensed,
The only truth declaring
Me aware?
And now this ruffling air!

My image breaks in the water of living.
God,
God,
God, what are you giving?

Here an answer. Here the lilies are white
On the blackness of the pool. And slight
The woundable and golden fish delight
In darkness.

Even praising night.
The water is blue, and the wind
Delights to disturb its reticence;
But not, for God's sake,
Assaulting the lake,
But firm with the insolence
Of love and desire...

And the white
Cool water-lilies—flowers
Are the water's living hours.

Bend in the night.
Obscure the shameless light,
And prove me in the dark
Either heresiarch
Or love's disciple, prostrate under prayer
And learning from the sacred air.

What God within your Holy Land
Makes me your believer?
What mind of mine can understand
Or—Judas—be deceiver?
Now in the dark I see my God
And chastened, I endure the rod.

The world surrounds me.
Cloud in heaven,
Rain down on me the seven
Human graces...

Let me see them in the faces
Of the drifting crowd,
And learn, and learn, the unclouded worth
Of dying man, and God, and earth.
Give me a rose, but let its breath
Sweeten me to death.
My cloud in heaven, drift in the air
And whiten my dark earthness everywhere.

I have no shape nor life, but drift
Like heaven's gift
Over the hills, and feed the streams
With the offering of my dreams.
And only then I rain
And worship living things with love and pain.

And still immortal, when I die,
You Messenger in Cloud, will fill the sky
With more than I
And yet with 'I'
Still asking why?
But let the quiet hill reply.

Now let me go into the night.
But you, over heaven white,
Give every blessing
On a man confessing
Love of the world in a heart that aches
For us and our human sakes.

I sing my praise. I sing the eternal air.
I breathe, I only breathe in prayer.

If in the evening God should cry:
'Who knows?'
What other fool but I
Would answer with a rose?

89
So I live between two worlds.
This subtle earth,
This flesh, these fireflies in the night
Are Indra thinking, Shiva in the air . . .
And you serenely move beyond delight,
The whiteness of all worth;
And in your ‘nothing’ fuse the ‘now’ and ‘there’.

90
My darkness is my hope. The flare of day
Would tell me what to say,
What see and feel that I now know.

But ignorance is faith. And if I shew
Nothing in my life to the very end,
God’s darkness will descend,
And mine.
Then darkness is divine.
Variations on a theme, by Keith Critchlow
Plato in his seventh letter did a great service to any of us who are asked to write about their inspirations (inner experiences) which are the sources of their arts. '... no intelligent man' he says 'will ever be so bold as to put into (written) language those things which his reason (most objective inner intelligence) has contemplated, especially not into a form that is unalterable – which must be the case with what is expressed in written symbols.' I must add however, from my own experience and conviction, the exception of 'revealed' knowledge and true poetry.

However, to stay with the present issue of one's own visual art, Plato further added, 'For this reason no serious man will ever think of writing about serious realities for the general public so as to make them a prey to envy and perplexity.' In this instance it is the avoidance of perplexity that I am particularly sensitive to.

All visual arts stand or fall by their own merit, i.e. they communicate their inherent ideas to others and are valued or not. However there is an important aspect that we have been concerned with in the presented images which we would like to characterize as 'sacred'. Having used such a word, we are quite aware that all serious and genuine artists treat their subject as 'sacred' on a personal level. However, what we mean by sacred is an artistic endeavour which is directed toward an objectivity in art which might be described as that art which grows out of or is sanctioned by a revealed tradition.

Buddhist, Vedic, Taoist, Christian, and Islamic arts are clearly of this kind. However, human judgement of the genuine in these traditions is not so clearly obvious. Such immense mysteries as 'inspiration' and 'revelation' by degree, as well as convention, sanction, improvisation and effectiveness all come into play.
There are periods in the establishment of sacred traditions when canonic rules of proportion, prohibitions on particulars and conventions for symbolic colours and shapes are evident. Yet the spirit of inspiration has the consistent habit of transcending these at times in all traditions. It is to the purpose of sacred art we must look if we are to differentiate it from any other category.

Even with Plato's warning clearly in mind, the following criteria come to mind: sacred art is an art that is integrative, 'transparent to the spirit', illuminating in the indescribable sense as well as in the interpretative sense of indicating the interrelatedness of ourselves with the world around us. Sometimes this art takes on explicit forms such as sacred icons or images which are effective because they reflect an essential aspect of each and all of us and act as reminders of our collective source and goal. At other times they achieve a balance of elements, a proportionality and harmony that resonates throughout our being. This has the effect of communicating 'universal' and objective principles of cohesion that give us the sense of certainty about the very nature of all things and our inseparable relationship to them. Wholly, holy and healthy have a common etymology.

The love of beauty and the beauty of love (in the totality of its meaning) is one such instance of the experience of certainty — irrespective of intellectual proof — a mother's love has no need of proof. At the most basic level nothing can really be considered worthy of the name of art unless it works as some sort of unity. Hence unity and the unified might be considered as the most fundamental criteria for any artist regardless of the differentiation between craftsman, 'fine', or 'applied' artist. The quality then we might suggest that signals the difference between works of art is the power of unity they achieve.

In the realm of Sacred Art this is particularly evident although the conventions of the various sacred traditions are different. We could characterize the significance of these differences by the maxim, 'conclusive, but not necessarily exclusive' when considering the relative achievement of a profound unity. (This maxim was conveyed to me by the contemporary Islamic scholar and writer, Professor S. H. Nasr.)

It is almost too simple to repeat that the objective of all sacred traditions is one, yet each path is quite different. Almost too simple because this same truth is applicable to the fact that all of us are
different yet we are all human. The key to the later statement (which is really of quite a different order) is: what do each of us mean when we say 'human'? This is where the difference lies in the integrative and disintegrative aspects of sacredness or otherwise in art.

The accompanying works in paint, ink or ceramics make no claims as to achievement or even pretensions as to the achievement of sacredness. They represent three people's efforts to understand and work within the boundaries of one such sacred convention – that of Islamic art. It is quite beyond the bounds of this short introduction to describe the discipline, preparation, effort, and contemplation that has gone into these works. It must suffice to say that not less than ten years' study (in some cases, treble this) lies behind each image shown, quite apart from the training in the fundamental skills of geometry, drawing and colour.

Those of us concerned here have made a particularly long, arduous and persistent effort to both understand the intrinsic laws, conventions, traditions, philosophies and sciences that are inherent in the Islamic tradition.

As a final thought, it seems relevant to remind both ourselves and possibly our viewers and readers of the genealogy of the word 'cosmos'. Decorative art is superficial to the degree one understands the original philosophical meaning of ΚΟΣΜΟΣ, from the ancient Greek meaning decoration or adornment. The material, visible, or phenomenal world was considered by the ancients as an adornment of the noumenal, invisible world of pure principle upon which it was totally reliant. Number, pattern, and colour are inseparable universal principles and always apparently will be so. They are fundamental keys to the understanding of both ourselves and the universe in which we live.
STAGE ONE

Sequential layout procedure for an Islamic pattern in five stages, by Paul Marchant

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STAGE TWO

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STAGE THREE

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STAGE FOUR

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STAGE FIVE

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'BLUE ROSE' ceramic tile by Paul Marchant
'STAR AND SHAMSA' ceramic tiles by Jay Bonner
'NASR' expanded version, mixed media by Keith Critchlow
'MIRIAM' mixed media by Keith Critchlow
‘HOMAGE TO BULLHI-SHAH’ water colour by Keith Critchlow
‘HOMAGE TO THE MEVLEVI’ mixed media by Paul Marchant
‘HARAM’ (Sanctuary) mixed media by Paul Marchant
‘STAR AND SHAMSA’ detail

Photography by A. C. Cash
Mural by Paul Marchant at the Ismaeli Institute, South Kensington.
JAN LE WITT

Encounters with Shadow

To Lewis Mumford

I have nine questions to ask but am asking only one.

By what chemistry is shadow conceived or does its ephemeral existence depend on the April clouds?

Views will always clash
as to the origins, nature and complexion of shadow.
Shadow – the more we know it the more we doubt it.

* * *

Architect of the Cobweb Citadels, surveyor of the transient forests
Shadow – some say – is a leaf grown in the silence
of the petrified forest.
Shadow – some say – is made of deserted black clouds hammered into thinfoil, forged in the smithy of the starless nights.
Shadow – some say – is the kernel of light, light in retreat
spectrum of the Nebulae,
shadow – the illusory dust of the world
deep sigh of mirrors
shadow – the salt in the eyes of the white light.
Featherweight anathema. Fear compressed.

It takes a hundredweight of shadows to produce one ghost.

* * *

One shadow meekly follows his master
two shadows trail behind a slave
three are attached to the weary footsteps of a convict.
A hundred shadows are pinned to fear, shadow the slave of slaves.
Aide-de-camp of substance, quintessence of humility
shadow is obedience itself.
Skin of spectre shadow is substance dethroned.
The pure stubborness of shadow. Treated with disdain
by all and sundry, tarred with the brush of contempt
yet when tiptoeing away eyes downcast, shadow inevitably returns
to live another fleeting hour.

* * *

Sleep comes alike to the eyebrows of gods and mortals.
The shadow of slumber is insomnia. Sleep forbidden to stony eyes.
The shadow of a centaur gallops ahead of the myth,
the shadow of a flamingo pirouettes towards the tide,
the shadow of an ammonite is eternity curled up
the shadow of air is a black perfume.
Shadow – malnutrition of substance.

Shadow looks at substance and asks: what next? What next?
Shadow the harbinger of doubt. Doubt a retreat
shadow and doubt brothers-in-arms in the art of vacillation.

The cotton wool echo of substance is nicknamed shadow.
Eloquence of substance. Silence of shadow, a pantomimic
and uncanny silence. For in spite of the seeming affinity between the two
there is as yet no familiarity between the two.

* * *

We smile at the way shadow lightly trips over a banana skin.
Tit for tat. Shadow smiles as we stumble over twilight.
Shadow is a fugitive, a traveller who unexpectedly arrives
at an Inn without luggage, and a traveller without luggage
is singularly unwelcome.

* * *

The cambric of shadow torn is past repair. Gale the culprit.
Gale the culprit.
Shadow wears a mackintosh in Richmond Park and a veil
at the Villa Borghese.
Perennially subjected to an exhaustive effort of adaptation
shadow is an impromptu performer of tragic dimension.

Shadow is fond of peeling apples by candlelight,
black apples of sadness. Sadness the mulatto fiancée of shadow.

If I am not mistaken
light is the Lord
light is ruthless
light decreed that shadow be right-handed
light decreed that shadow be left-handed
light is volatile. Shadow is tongue-tied
light invades
light usurps
light dictates
shadow subscribes to the Eastern symbol
of balance.

Sunbeam is useful.
Everyone knows the usefulness of the useful
but who knows the usefulness of the useless?
Shadow clearly belongs to the clan of the useless.

Shadow like the dolphin sleeps two hours a day
one eye at a time.
A leporello of shadows black-labelled the white night.
At three in the morning shadow dreamt it was a butterfly
a Queen of Spain frilltary, complete with comb and décolleté.
Is that so? How absurd. The Painted Lady shook with laughter.
The Red Admiral shook with laughter
the White Admiral shook with laughter
and outside in the yard
the dogs cried.

Shadow dare not look a mirror in the face.
Light and shade are of one thread
the same line viewed from different angles
The voices of light and shadow are heard together.
The sounds of midnight and dawn are heard together.
Shadow – a musician astride the rostrum of unreality
Upon a sheet of music spilled, shadow weighs half a ton
desperate cry of a hundred cellos crushed by the irksome
weight of the inkstains.
Mahler's Fourth Symphony in agony.

* * *

Herodotus tarred Astarte with the brush of shadow.
In the Forum Romanum Romulus and Remus once threw shadows
at each other. Shadow – great anathema shadow –
the lengthened shadow of man is history – Emerson proclaimed.
History that long long chain of events
fermented patina of age, the dust that buried Troy three times over
song of despair, stubborn lament
black leaves across the graveyards
black grass across the centuries
black doves across the prairies
  shadow must escape
  shadow must escape.

Blackbirds do not readily hang out white flags
turtledoves do not grow pale at death
shadow is a struggle not a behaviour
a dark power skimmed from the caves of Lascaux
a pack of cards made up wholly of queens of spades.
  Shadow – the skeleton at the feast?

* * *

Everything profound loves the mask
the mask of shadow
  steeped in profundity.

If I am not mistaken
shadow is a sun-ray undressed
shadow is a lining attached to the cloak of substance.
Shadow betrays substance whereas substance betrays only itself.
When substance is in pain shadow like a swift eagle.
rushed across the mountain stream
to fetch an ambulance.

In tow to the life force – shadow
the carbon paper of matter
a gazelle-striped wallpaper inside the catacombs
foliage adorning the snowy landscape.
Shadow –
tongue tied shadow looks up with surprise
at the strange whiteness of the prison cell's ceiling.

* * *

In its way shadow is fortunate –
misfortune comes from having a body
and shadow has no body
shadow owns no skeleton
shadow owns no backbone
shadow owns no echo
form of the formless, image of the imageless
shadow cannot be grasped
not even with tongs of iron can it be grasped.

Shadow is limited. Shadow is perishable.
Terminal of the limited.

Life, substance, movement are unlimited.
For the limited to pursue the unlimited is madness.

* * *

Umbra! Umbra!
Great anathema umbra. You are a crucifixion
without a crucifix. Tissue of condolence
a flimsy tissue born a curse.
Umbra – mute echo. Umbra! Umbra!
Scaremonger extraordinary
a hummingbird that sold its breath to Mephistopheles
stone saying amen in a harsh metallic voice
stone saying amen to spite the night.
Shadow is waterproof
shadow foretells
shadow warns
shadow haunts
shadow issues home truths
shadow sticks its neck out.

Shadow – the blade that cuts the diamonds of nuance.

Absence and silence ride in tandem
misfortune rides in tandem
calamity rides in tandem.

Mene mene tekel
in the flight of birds we read the future
in the flight of shadow we read the instruments of fear
Balshazzar's feast – feast of anguish.
Mene mene tekel upharsin . . .
Alphabet of fear.
To decipher the writing on the wall shadow raised high the black candles
to decipher the ominous writing on the wall.
A kite with guilty feathers – feathers of doom
shadow is a doomsday star, a star that cannot escape calumny
and in such a role shadow is not miscast.
Sundial of indiscretion
a silent clock lying in ambush
awaiting the Day of Judgment.

Lao-Tzu said:
if you hide the universe in the universe
there is no way to lose it.
A truth shadow committed to memory a long time ago
when still a newcomer to the world.
It is its own source. Its own root. Its own antennae.
Shadow is wiser than we are. In its fingertips
there is premonition and prudence.
Shadow is an insoluble contradiction.
ENCOUNTERS WITH SHADOW

When shadow meanders or walks diagonally across the Milky Way casting shadows in liquid zig-zags the silvery constellations acquire the innocent look of embryo mystery.

Shadow – like a comic actor must make himself unbelievable. The comic actor may not succeed but shadow does

The world is littered with discrimination. When El Greco elongates we call it divine and calming we dissolve in adulation. But when shadow elongates on the barren ground outside we call it troubling. Sensing the ominous we look away in fear and fear is never far away.

The earth, said Nietzsche, has a skin; and this skin has diseases. One of these is called ‘Man’. By the same token, maintains Man, the sun has a skin and this skin has a disease called ‘Shadow’.

Man the evaluator, he who created the false table of values to him Sun is pure honey and shadow the impurity that befouled it:

How odd: Man and Shadow see eye to eye, eye to eye but when Man dares to stare at the sun the pupil of the sun blinds him mercilessly.

Pitilessly sunbeam burnt the adolescent grass. Pitilessly the brilliant light ravaged as it shone on the corpses in the crematoria whilst shadow consoled – so they say the throbbing wounds at Auschwitz.
The love that moves the sun and the other stars. 
Love is the music of forgetting 
love – an alcove for the marigolds of solitude. 
Spring reborn. 
Shadow-purveyor of alcoves 
an alcove for Ruth of Moab 
an alcove for Beatrice 
a trellis for Persephone 
scaffoldings evanescent for love reciprocated 
gauze canopies spanning the pavilions of the heart 
shutters of shadow majestically discreet. Virgin breath. 
Springtide of shadow echoing love – love forbidden 
arrayed on the balconies of midnight. 

* \* \ *

Astride wild geography shadow crosses the Rubicon.

Shadow is of ironic birth 
a silence awaiting a voice parasol in hand. 
Without shadow the blue summerhouse of Destiny would be less blue. 
In the porphyry world of shadows there is no law of gravity there is only the law of nonchalance. 
Shadow has no adhesive qualities. The white of egg is needed. 
Only a madman or a poet would attempt to tie together sheets of shadows torn apart, with harpsichord strings. 
Shadow makes neckties for golliwogs. 

Shadow does strange things. 

* \* \ *

I have nine questions to ask but am asking only one. 

Shadow – is it the same at Masada? 
The same at Herculaneum? 
The same at Stonehenge? The same at the Ile St Louis? 

Oh, why do we not learn to love pain? 
Oh, why do we not learn to love hunger? 
Shadow – the great anathema
architect of the Cobweb Citadels
flotsam of the November nights
harvest of the seven lean years
harvest of the seven lean dreams
assembly line of self-denial
heritage of the crown of thorns.
Shadow demands that we carry a vagabond's violin
wherever we go, wherever we go
and in pagliaccio fashion laugh as we cry
cry as we laugh.

A rib ripped off light's live body
shadow is a terrifying illumination
sailing under the flag of inconvenience.

Shadows are the ashes of light
anxiety made visible.
The arrival of shadow is always a surprise.
God bequeathed shadow to the world so that man
need not feel the pain of loneliness
Did God commit an indiscretion?

In the aftermath of life shadow may undergo a transformation.
It may yet become substance. Who knows? Who knows?
Some dreams materialize, some come true late in the day
shadow - the more we know it the more we doubt it.

A witness to our blurred destinies
shadow is a cobweb not to be touched by gloveless fingers
or it may disintegrate before our eyes.

Stendhal was right:
Painting is morality put into a form.
Shadow is a full-fledged partner to form.
Light has a thousand eyes yet will not see
will not admit it.
Let us agree. For once let us agree.
Nature has its obstinate code of logic
a logic of its own, the logic of contrariness.
If nature wills a curve may cast an angular shadow.
If nature wills an ugly woman may cast a beautiful shadow.
If nature wills the shadow of a javelin is as innocent as a straw.
Shadows Kafkaesque. Kafkaesque.

Through a whim of nature the shadow of an aquatic mammal
is no mightier than the shadow of a midge
shadow's illegible signature
underwriting the illusory solidity of substance.

Mother Nature – ambidextrous, generous with one hand
denying with the other.
Nature – why did she hold back a speck of autonomy?
    the flea
    the eft
    the ant
    the mosquito
    the chrysalis
the animalcules denizens of water
have all been granted a measure of free will
shadow alone left out.
Shadow alone – to this day compelled to move by the grace
and whim of others.
A phantom dog
    led on a phantom leash.
    A blind dog limping
on the dotted line
    fate outlined . . .

I have nine questions to ask but am asking only one.

Hamlet Prince of Denmark, human object
was he not a shadow casting a shadow?
an echo pregnant with echo?
Oh, the exaggerated hatred
Oh, the morbid motherlove
the shady disrepute of shadow bankrupt of light
a mathematical formula
a dry graph hard to bend
hard to comprehend.
Oh! That this too too frail foil would melt in a tunnel.

Into a book with pages uncut shadow cannot enter
yet easily penetrates the core of the void.
Shadow is the void whose dizziness surrenders to intuition
in a climate of anguish.
Shadow is the achievement of solemnity.

Making accusations is not as good as laughing.
How is it that sober minds take shadow for so much idle musing?
How is it that sober minds deny shadow recognition?
It is a poetic fact, is it not, that shadow
   casting shadows and shadows upon shadows
has secret movements?
    Nest-like powers?
    A dreamlike gaze?
Moon shadows — are they not sacred plants
growing on sacred soil?
Shadow — is it not a bunch of keys?
Master keys without which the prehistoric bison
could not have unlocked the gates of the caves.
Shadow is sesame. Shadow is sesame.
Early in the morning shadow feels like silk brocade.
Without shadows there would be no flowers for the prophets.
Without shadows there would be no children's games.

Shadow moves and whatever moves is an apparition.
The traffic lights at the aquarium are drinking shadows.
Shadow in turn is feasting on the profiles of fishes.
The fragile Lantern fishes.
The telescope-eyed fish of China. The Tiger fish.
Shadow sealed the nooks and crannies of the earth with black putty.
Unlike the verandahs of Eden the verandahs of the world are littered with shapes and forms.
In a world saturated with shapes and forms what for the shadows indolently idling away the hours?
Footprints sombre discernible at every turn every twist, every corner.
By spreading carpets and rugs at the foot of a tree shadow makes a living enough to feed itself.

A cat has nine lives — shadow has ninety nine.
Shadow is an insoluble contradiction laden with farewells.
Rohrschach's test of duplicity.
When a straw hat is tilted to the left — shadow settles on the right invariably touching the forehead's sensuous demarcation line.

Shadow wanders where there is no path it dwells in the void of the infinite drawing arabesques all the way all the way to the fragile edge of the world.

Shadow dare not look a mirror in the face. To shadow the face of a mirror is the unlit face of the mirror whence the black torches salute darkness there shadow feels truly at home.
Relaxed. Lacquering its fingernails, slumbering in an armchair.

Calm shadow — what is it? The black milk flowing within the breasts of mother earth, balsam of the perpetual night?
Calm shadow — what is it? The laced petticoat, girdle of virgins caressing the perpetual night?
ENCOUNTERS WITH SHADOW

Calm shadow – what is it?
The black peacock wearing the blue apron of passion
to tempt the crimson-lipped crystal dream?

Calm shadow tattooes the pearly breasts
of acrobats at the hour of siesta.

* * *

Let us for a moment lean on a hypothesis
imagine a shadowless world
an echoless world
no torches, no alchemy
no residues of fire
a domain of no pain
a domain of no opposites
a realm of no accents.
Chiaroscuro stillborn.

A bed of roses without thorns . . .

Who would be there to conduct negotiations
with the Inner Light?
With whom would the sunrays play baccarat?

No pomegranates. No pregnant profiles.
No splendours on canvas from Caravaggio
     Rembrandt, Chardin or Georges de la Tour
for that matter.
Slumbering in an underground passage
the shell of unity
the shell of unity between light and shade
unpunctured.

Came the painters –
came the painters and woke shadow.

On Saskia’s face
light and shade reconciled at last.
On Saskia’s face
white chalk and black chalk signed a pact.
In the enclave of the Muses
in the realm of make-believe
the morbid modesty of shadow put to good use.

Here imagination gains its perfume.
Here magic becomes an indoor game.

Adam had an appetite for the apple
Silhouette – a craving for shadows.

In a world of no shadows
Etienne de Silhouette deprived of his jeu d’esprit
robbed of his play of shadows
lost in the corridors of power
remembered solely as the parsimonious
Monsieur le Ministre des Finances.

Ushered into the ante-room of oblivion
he would have remained there forever.
Yet profiles are pinned on our walls to this day
Silhouette on our lips to this day.

Let us not sing the praise of folly.
Let us not upset the apple-cart of metamorphosis.
Let us not contradict mythology.

The light bulb imitates the sun-god
yet imitation of shadow tempts no one.
Shadow – did it commit a sin by being born?
Even the shadow of Fra Angelico frightened children –
so they say. So they say.

The shadows sprawling in my garden know everything
but say nothing.
ENCOUNTERS WITH SHADOW

Shadow – godmother of outlines
porte-manteau of superstition
a concertina for Orpheus to play requiems
by the banks of Scamander.

Shadow does strange things
compelling things.
When Venus in her solemn nakedness
leaves the amphitheatre of vanity
shadow swiftly leans over her like the Tower of Pisa
and gripping her hourglass waist whispers:
‘Come – come with me to the grasslands of Thessaly
come – out of you I’ll make a viol da gamba’.

Shadow –
the elliptical nature of its conversation guillotined.
Self-bedevilled gesture. Coil of fatality
shadow is a deliverance that does not deliver
a glance as cautious as a tortoise.

Cracked and dry
shadow dies in pools of violet blood
by the colonnades of midnight.

Sunset at dawn.

We are leaving these shores
but what shall we do with loneliness?
Leave it behind?

Sunset at dawn.
Ravens invading the skies –
come from the desert the birds
are drinking syllables at dawn.
Raven – grim raven
   once a white bird
   messenger of Noah
   now fed on the flesh of the dead.

LASCIAE OGGNI SPERANZA
   the Braille-embroidered sign
   above the portico of Inferno
   magnum opus of shadow the calligrapher.

Star witness to our blurred destinies
   shadow must never be touched
   by gloveless fingers.
Plato, that prince of poets, when he sought the expression of ultimate truths, turned to imaginative myth. All who are aware that at the heart of life lies infinitude are also aware of a point at which the language of discursive reason must give way to paradox, imagination, or silence: as Tao Te Ching put it, 'The Tao that can be expressed in words is not the eternal Tao'. Plato built his own awareness of the supra-rational into his philosophy and myths, speaking of uniting with Beauty, 'seeing it with the faculty capable of seeing it', or viewing the intelligible sun of the Good as the material sun is viewed, i.e. not apprehending it directly as an object, for no eye can look directly upon the sun. By its very nature reason can only operate in terms of duality, including the fundamental duality of apprehending subject and apprehended object; in The Republic Plato is explicit that the Good lies beyond all such duality, beyond the perceiving mind and perception and all objects of perception, and is not to be classed as one of the Ideas ('objects of sight') or Forms. It is rather the origin of the power of seeing itself, as well as of the seer and the seen. With the pursuit of Beauty and the Good as his primary concern, Plato is notoriously suspicious of art, fearing, and not without cause, its power to incite the passions: nevertheless, a great artist himself, he is clearly fascinated by Homer and the poets, he allows into his Republic art that conduces to stillness (and it is the most powerfully moving art that does this), and in texts like the Ion he concedes that art can be the result of divine inspiration. It is certainly no accident that the influence of Plato lies directly or indirectly behind so much European art, from the poetry and sculpture of Michelangelo to certain aspects of Shakespeare and many major works of the English Romantic poets.

The links forged by Plato between myth, truth, art and the nature of perception were fed into the European tradition. Plotinus, the most powerful developer and expositor of Plato's thought, was even more
explicit in his assertion that discursive reason, working in terms of either—or, is in no way equipped to grasp infinitude, for grasping is by definition finite:

It is the office of reason to distinguish and define. The Infinite therefore cannot be ranked among its objects. You can only apprehend the Infinite... by entering into a state in which you are your finite self no longer.¹

Like Plato Plotinus spoke at length of the intelligible sun of the Good, and while he did not create his own myths, he repeatedly turned by way of illustration to the religious myths of Greece, Kronos swallowing his children or Narcissus drowning in his reflection, and interpreted them as symbolic incarnations of metaphysical truth. Art he treated in the same context, the mind being led by the sensory quality of a work towards metaphysical levels of experience, at which point art as artifact is transcended. Plotinus's insight tended to become submerged in the later European Christian tradition, which tended to be more literal in its attention to art and to religion, though it did also contain profound developments such as the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of icons. However, the symbolic aspect of the literal history of the world, as conceived by Christianity, was fully exploited and applied to the metaphysical levels of direct mental experience by many of the mystics, witness Eckhart's teasing of metaphysical significance out of biblical incident, or Böhme's treatment of the wrath of God, the virgin birth or the incarnation of Christ in the human soul. With this approach went the reiteration of the Platonic distinction between the higher and lower modes of intelligence, Eckhart insisting that God be known timelessly and not just as an idea, while Böhme distinguished between Verstand, direct spiritual cognition, and the äussere Vernunft, the outer discursive reason whose range is limited to 'the stars and the four elements' of the relative world.

This distinction between higher and lower modes of human intelligence in Böhme, Eckhart and the broadly Platonic tradition is integral to that tradition's insistence on the interdependence of the questions of art, myth, truth and the nature of mind. Modern literary criticism has tended to ignore this interdependence, and most modern philosophy has underplayed it or subjected it to undue limitation, though there are notable exceptions (Heidegger, for instance, is careful to
distinguish between a truth, such as a conformity between statement and fact, and the 'truth of the given being' of something, stating that in a work of art 'it is truth, not only something true, that is at work', and tying this in with the nature of awareness as such). Yet an understanding of this complex of questions, and of the greater scope allowed to the mind by a Platonic and other similar traditions, is essential if we are to enter fully into the work of writers like Blake, powerfully imaginative mythopoeic artists with an explicit interest in consciousness. Only in this broader context does their thought about the mind, and specifically the creative imagination, become coherent sense. The whole complex of interrelated issues is best approached, in terms of the western tradition, through Plotinus, and corroboration for the view that Plotinus is conceptualizing experience, not spinning cobwebs of the mind from a system of rational abstractions, can be gained by comparing his work with that of Maharishi Patanjali, an Indian philosopher from a completely different historical tradition.

For Plotinus the origin of the mind is not in the individual or in the physical body, but in the cosmic self-awareness arising 'within' the Absolute, within 'That which is beyond number'. This self-awareness is unitive (subject, object and awareness being the same; awareness being the nature of the subject and its own object), yet it contains diversity in unity, for self-awareness transforms the transcendent Absolute into the potentialities of the relative. The Platonic Ideas or Forms are for Plotinus 'concepts' in this self-awareness (the Intellectual Principle or Second Hypostasis in the terminology of the MacKenna-Page translation), yet, being at this level of divine life, they are not concepts as we know them, but rather beings whose nature is to combine individuality with universality:

All is transparent, nothing dark, nothing resistant; every being is lucid to every other, in breadth and depth; light runs through light. And each of them contains all within itself, and at the same time sees all in every other, so that everywhere there is all, and all is all and each all, and infinite the glory. (v.8.p.425)²

Plotinus repeatedly associates this level with light, in a more than metaphorical sense, and holds that it is accessible to the human mind, which is a ray of the intelligible sun.

If the Soul is questioned as to the nature of that Intellectual-
Principle...it has but to enter into that Principle, or to sink all its activity into that, and at once it shows itself to be in effective possession of those priors whose memory it never lost: thus, an image of the Intellectual-Principle, it can make itself the medium by which to attain some vision of it. (v.3.p.390)

True knowledge of anything is wisdom, knowledge of that thing in terms of its origin from the wholeness of the Intellectual-Principle within it (compare Heidegger's notion of the 'history' of an object), and this is also true of the unitive wisdom of art:

The artist himself goes back...to that wisdom in Nature which is embodied in himself; and this is not a wisdom built up of theorems but one totality, not a wisdom consisting of manifold detail co-ordinated into a unity but rather a unity working out into detail. (v.8.p.426)

Beyond this kind of knowledge, which, while unitive, is still working in terms of subject-object, lies 'ecstasy', not an emotional state, as it is usually misapprehended, though an emotional state may derive from it, but the 'standing outside oneself' that is the literal meaning of the Greek word, the passing beyond the subject-object relationship and therefore the total obliteration of the individual self while the 'experience' lasts, the state that W. T. Stace, in Mysticism and Philosophy, called 'pure consciousness', consciousness devoid of empirical content. To unite with the manifest Beauty of the Intellectual Principle and to be at one with its source in the Absolute is the prime aim of life, and to assist in this union is the prime aim of knowledge and of art, while religious myth is at once a metaphysical history of the universe and a signpost on the road to unity.

Plotinus's Enneads are comprehensive in scope. Maharishi Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, which have just been brilliantly translated by Alistair Shearer, are more specifically focused on the nature of the mind. They are indeed the classic text and textbook of yoga in the Indian tradition, 'yoga' being cognate with our word 'yoke' and meaning union, total integration. For Patanjali mind and ego are both objects rather than ultimate subjects: the mind is, as it were, a mirror reflecting the light of pure consciousness, consciousness beyond the limitations of the di- or trichotomy of the subject-object relationship. Here, however, the analogy breaks down, for the mirror should itself be nothing but a
configuration of light. The individuality is thus, it might be said, a useful illusion, useful in providing a focus for the potentiality of intelligence itself, an illusion in that the strict ‘hereness–thereness’ division between ego and cosmic environment that is now so dominant in the west is illusory. From Patanjali’s point of view the basis of the individual mind is beyond individuation, beyond space-time and beyond causation, and to this beyondness the individual mind can have direct access, since this is its own ultimate nature. Being thus at its basis beyond space and time, the individual mind can also have access to the totality of the space-time universe, including of course the totality of time, for the whole is within all its parts (this last claim Böhme reiterated frequently, and it is of course found in Blake’s ‘To see a World in a Grain of Sand’). In the Yoga Sutras Patanjali outlines the methodology by which the individual mind may begin to experience and then to use the whole within it.

The development of mental potentiality involves what Patanjali calls samādhi, literally ‘settled mind’, the extreme form of samādhi being nirbija samādhi when mental activity ceases in pure consciousness (Plotinus’s ‘state in which we are our finite selves no longer’, referred to by Böhme at one point as ‘falling home’ to the Ungrund, the boundless infinitude beyond manifest nature). Between the surface activity of the mind and nirbija samādhi there are, however, many degrees of settledness, and in these alternative modes of cognition are available to the mind. They include what Alistair Shearer has translated as ‘subtle perception’ of the inner nature of objects, the kind of perception that so overwhelmed Böhme at the beginning of his career, and perception of ‘the inner radiance which is free from sorrow’ (the heavenly light with which Böhme found himself surrounded, the light of Plotinus’s Intellectual Principle, known to the Eastern Orthodox Church as the Uncreated Light and described by St Symeon and others, the light of the universal Buddha nature in the language of The Tibetan Book of the Dead, the light which, I have argued elsewhere, Wordsworth experienced and named the ‘celestial light’ – the experience is quite tangible: Sanskrit has a particular term, jyoti, for this inner radiance, as opposed to aloka, the light of common day by which we see in surface cognition). More pertinent here is what Patanjali calls ritambhara, the level ‘where consciousness perceives only the truth’, the point of the dawning of the spiritual light. Here, according to Patanjali, the mind has access to
omniscience, being able to reflect it without impurity or interference, and learning from this level is what Plato always claimed it to be, a process of remembering, of recalling a desired aspect of truth from the depths of the mind (from this point of view the basic aim of all education should be the activation of ritambhara in the minds of the students). According to Patanjali it is only knowledge gained from ritambhara that is infallible, inference, report and other methods of knowing being partial and liable to error. There are also other possibilities of cognition, according to Patanjali, including the ability to see in any object its past and future, for both are latent within it. Since all parts have the whole within them, the cognition of an object, or ultimately of the whole relative universe, becomes for Patanjali a matter of avidyā, literally ‘a-knowledge’ or ‘un-knowledge’, though it is usually translated ‘ignorance’, a term which, given the dualistic tendency of English, has in this context regrettable overtones of independent self-sufficiency. Un-knowledge provides the basis of relative existence, manifestation being simply a partial occlusion or veiling of wholeness, of infinitude: however, since the mind also has within it ritambhara, perfect knowledge, a human being is free to exist in the relative world in a condition of perfect knowledge, to be in the world but not of it. This is described by Patanjali as the condition of freedom, but it is also presented in India and in other traditions as the condition in which the world becomes the play of cosmic art and life an artistic creating.

In this new mode of world experience as spontaneous creativity all the parameters of experience have been changed. The actor’s sense of identity is no longer based on externals. The meaning of meaning has changed, being rooted beyond time. Space-time is experienced as an aspect of consciousness, yet an individual projection of that consciousness is experienced ‘within’ space-time. The possibility of suffering on the surface levels remains, yet assuaged by what the Taoists call ‘the Great Peace’, the ‘peace that passeth understanding’ (‘passeth’ literally in that it springs from beyond the subject–object dichotomy of the active personal mind). It is the preservation of an inkling of this possibility that ultimately lies behind the Renaissance Platonist trope of the world as a stage and man as an actor, though it was often interpreted in a much cruder rationalistic fashion. It is also the actuality of such a situation that gives rise to an acute form of a linguistic
problem that already exists in everyday life. In order to communicate language depends on common experience, and common experience means not merely a common object of experience but also a shared mode of consciousness in the experiencers: as the *Rig Veda* puts it, 'Knowledge is different in different states of consciousness', or as Blake said, 'A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees'. Writing for those already within a particular tradition of mental discipline, Patanjali did not concern himself with these wider problems, whereas Plotinus in the turbulence of Rome was obliged to take them into account. Art and myth were important for Plotinus, for it is here that art and myth come into their own: they have the ability to speak to different modes or levels of consciousness, they have the advantage of multiple reference subjectively as well as objectively.

Myths and art are of course distinct though related phenomena. A myth gives the bare bones of a story, and if embodied in poetry, painting or sculpture, it provides only one element of a work of art. Myths are both communal and individual, traditional myths being reworked by reciters, poets or writers, while some individual literary creations can assume virtually the status of communal myth, passing from hand to hand and generation to generation. If Plotinus's line of interpretation is accepted as intrinsically true, as it is by the Platonic tradition, then myth is both a history of consciousness and a history of the metaphysical origin of the universe expressed in material terms, and it implies a range of consciousness beyond the material and ratiocinative level of the mind. Seeing myth as a record of levels of consciousness permanently accessible within the human psyche, the Renaissance Platonists were justified in trying to reconcile all myths on a symbolic level. What is myth to an outsider is, however, often simple physical historical fact to someone within a particular religious or cultural tradition: the miraculous lives of Christ, or of Krishna or of Buddha are obvious instances of this kind of ambiguity. Nevertheless, whatever the supposed degree of physical truth, myth always gives some kind of pattern to human experience, macrocosmically and microcosmically; hence it subsumes elements of extreme cruelty and violence, and it speaks not to the reason, but the imagination. The 'meaning' of a myth seems never to be the rational explanation that is given to it. If the rational explanation were the meaning, then once known it would render the myth obsolete, useless. But myths live on.
Plato's myth of the cave says something that no explanation of its 'meaning' can say, not even his own. This ability of myth to speak to the imagination is important and one of the qualities it shares with art: it is the reason why myth has given rise to so many works of art in the various traditions. Yet if myth lingers as a pattern in the mind, shaping experience, a work of art has greater immediate impact because of its more local focus and greater definition of form. Their dominant appeal is to different aspects of the imagination, which is at once the cutting edge of the mind, seeking out and envisioning new possibilities and new syntheses before they can be grasped by reason, also the image-making faculty and, as the Romantic poets pointed out, the faculty that can grasp truth whole and directly, assimilating it and uniting it with the perceiving subject. Truth here is of course the holistic truth Plotinus speaks of, Heidegger's 'truth of the given being' of things, Plato's truth perceived through the intelligible sun, not the empirical truth of the flickering shadows upon the cave wall. 'What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth', or as Plotinus said, 'the artist himself goes back . . . to that wisdom in Nature which is embodied in himself', a wisdom derived from the Intellectual Principle that is Beauty manifest. When, said Plotinus, 'Pheidias wrought the Zeus' he did so 'upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight'. Pheidias carried a figure from religious myth to its origin in the cosmic intelligence within himself and from there created the appropriate physical form for that culture, time and place. It is because the artist has made this inward leap in order to project the work outwards, that the work has the obverse capacity to carry the mind of the perceiver back towards the level of cosmic intelligence from which it derives. This is imagination at its highest, an aspect of Patanjali's ritambharā channelled through an artistic sensibility, and it offers the fulfilment of the way of the artist of which Plotinus spoke when he said that the musician, and by implication others like him, 'must be drawn by the tone, rhythm, and design in things of sense . . . [and] led to the Beauty that manifests itself through these forms'. And the principle is the same if the artist deals directly with subjects from ordinary life; the ordinariness must be transcended if the work is to succeed, and, as Heidegger pointed out in the case of Van Gogh's picture of a pair of clogs, the effects of this ripple out to include our relationship with all objects.
While the local is transcended in a work of art, nevertheless the idiom of its age and culture remain, its style is of a period and place, and it relates to the values of its cultural origin, though if it is a work of stature it will not be restricted by them (one of the results of this is the discovery of new values in the work by another age or culture). Our own age in the west (and now to some extent throughout the world) is one of sophisticated imbalance as we have increasingly succumbed to the rationality of the materially given at the expense of the deeper aspects of the mind, aspects that earlier lingered in awareness as the inkling of a possibility largely through the Platonic tradition. Heidegger as usual was deeply aware of the problem this posed, as is shown by his 'Memorial Address' in honour of Conradin Kreutzer, and he instinctively turned to mysticism and to art as auxiliaries in his search for an answer. In Blake's Jerusalem Los, the imagination, is praised for having 'Kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble'. Even more important than the vision, however, is art's capacity to preserve the visionary faculty itself, to keep open a door in the mind leading to the faculties that lie beyond the restricted range of discursive reason. To say this is not to enter a plea for unreason, emotionalism, or fanaticism; discursive reason has its necessary and important place (what would Europe have been without the rational tolerance of Voltaire?), but for the sake of sanity it is necessary that its limitations be recognized. Neither objectivity nor subjectivity alone is enough, and as our culture has leaned more exclusively towards the objective and rational pole, so literature has brought out the subjective and imaginative contribution to life, and it has used the relationship between myth and consciousness or mind as a means of reinstating balance in the psyche.

These tendencies can be seen in a particularly clear form in the work of Blake, whose imaginative foresight makes him even more relevant to our time than he was to his own. He shared the common Romantic perception of the epic as concerned with the mind as much as external events. Homer had invoked the Muse when in need of data and divine assistance; Milton at the beginning of Paradise Lost turned the invocation into a subjective prayer for personal purity; the balance in the invocation to Blake's Book of Urizen is different:

Of the primeval Priests assum'd power,
When Eternals spurned back his religion:
And gave him a place in the north,
Obscure, shadowy, void, solitary.
Eternals I hear you call gladly,
Dictate swift winged words, & fear not
To unfold your dark visions of torment.

Supremely confident in himself (it is the Eternals who fear to dictate, not Blake who fears to transcribe) he invites the Eternals from within the myths of the fall of Satan and the book of Genesis to reinterpret those myths in a non-literal way, thus building on what Böhme had already done in the *Mysterium Magnum*. In doing this he uses myth as a language and takes ordinary understanding into his myth, while pushing towards a total understanding that bursts the bounds of the myth itself. Blake's grasp of space and time was nearer to Einstein's than it was to the mechanistic religious and scientific understanding of his day, while his apprehending of the subject-object relationship is nearer to Patanjali's than it is to that of most of his modern critics. The six thousand years of history that constituted the accepted early nineteenth-century European time scale transmute into spatial objects in *Milton* and are shown in *The Book of Urizen* as by-products of the fragmentation of consciousness, of its bifurcation into subject and object. Both myths of the fall and myths of the primeval sacrifice of a divine victim held essentially this significance for Blake. Being 'merely' a literary myth *The Book of Urizen* or *Jerusalem* can by-pass the literal-rational censorship of the modern mind and speak to the imagination. The imagination can in turn illumine the process of the mind in experiencing, and at this point the unsuspecting reader may find himself questioning the received 'rational' conceptions, in this case time as a linear sequence (still the basis of Christian theology) and the exclusive validity of the objective: the mental-cultural censor can thus find himself out of a job, or at least in a different uniform. In other words the literary myth, in works of art such as Blake's, is able not only to communicate between different levels of consciousness, it can also encourage change in levels of consciousness. The myth is not just an object, but also a process.

Myth as process in Blake has two aspects. The less important is the change effected in ideas and attitudes by a re-adjustment of the mind's relationship to its cultural context, a reinterpreting of that context. As Blake rewrites the myth of Genesis in *The Book of Urizen*, or the Christian myth of world history together with the history of our culture in *Milton*, so he moves conceptualizations of the divine from the figure of an external law-giver, towards an internalized divine humanity. When this
is done, history, which exists in the mind, changes, for the past is always a figment of the present. The more important aspect, which arises from Blake's handling of space, time, individuality and causality, is a glimpse of freedom. If, instead of our minds being sensed as isolated individuals within space-time, we can sense space-time as within the mind of our universal individuality, then we have some inkling of liberation. That this should come from imaginative experience is no accident, for, as Böhme pointed out, it is the imagination that leads the mind towards new areas of experience and new states of being: indeed Böhme called it the most powerful faculty of the mind. The vision of the imagination provides the material for reason to work upon: 'What is now proved was once only imagin'd'. Moreover, freedom, being a state not a concept, is nearer to imagination, or sensation, than to reason, for we sense or imagine directly, but we reason 'about' something, always at second hand.

In making Jesus the divine Imagination within the human mind, and insisting that perception is active, creative, Blake was both tackling the central problem of our culture, and affirming a view corroborated by other aspects of experience and other cultures. Physically, for instance, we learn to see, as Jung pointed out when he described bushmen gradually deciphering a photograph that had originally been just a blur to them (once a shape is deciphered, we can see only that, and the blur disappears: what we see is our interpretation of visual data, a principle used by Gombrich and others in their exploration of the visual arts). Shankaracharya used an analogous but more far-reaching principle when he compared the ordinary notion of the objective universe to taking a rope for a snake – during the period of illusion it is indeed the snake and not the rope that we see. Like Patanjali, Shankaracharya held that at its deepest the mind is illusion-free and does not impose limitations upon perception. However this may be, as the mind moves towards that level from the surface cognition of gross matter, the subjective element in cognition appears to be strengthened: the mind sees imaginatively, its form of visionary perception being often culturally inherited (this is particularly noticeable in the case of religious visions; Arjuna's vision of God in his universal form in the Bhagavad Gita would not be experienced in precisely the same way by a Moslem or Christian). Since visionary experience is variable and liable to error, reason is a necessary aid in sorting out the imagin-
ative from the imaginary, but in genuinely imaginative experience the underlying unity is more important than the differences. Consequently the imaginative language of other cultures and races can be learnt and makes sense. Moreover Jung and the Platonists are surely right that mythical archetypes tend to reappear without any necessary historical link. Figures or symbols recur, such as the serpent, potentially wise or evil, associated with space-time, the material world and (pace Freud) usually the feminine, which occurs from the plumed serpent of the Aztecs through the Pacific to the cobra of Shiva, the cobra of Isis (worn on the royal crown of Egypt) that bit Amen Ra in the heel, the serpent of Genesis, the oracular serpent of Delphi, the Graeco–Roman serpent sybils and African female serpent oracles, to the world serpent of Nordic myth. Also whole narrative patterns recur. The following, from Shri Shankaracharya, is echoed in countless western legends:

The treasure of the bliss of Brahman is coiled round by the mighty and dreadful serpent of egoism, and guarded for its own use by means of its three fierce hoods consisting of the three gunas. Only the wise man, destroying it . . . with the great sword of realization . . . can enjoy this treasure which confers bliss.  

(302.p.115)5

Shankaracharya virtually provides a commentary on Blake’s

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night

when he says:

Thou hast out of sheer grace awakened me from sleep and completely saved me, who was wandering in an interminable dream, in a forest of birth, decay, and death created by illusion, being tormented day after day by countless afflictions, and sorely troubled by the tiger of egoism.  

(518.p.193)

The parallel, though surprising, is not fortuitous, since both Blake and Shankaracharya were moving from their respective cultural circumstances towards truth via imagination and myth.

If truth becomes Truth, myth and art are both transcended. The ultimate, as Plotinus insisted, defies formulation, yet images and certain physical phenomena can stimulate the imagination to some inkling of it. It is usually described as stillness, but it is a dynamic
stillness. A string stretched can be vibrated, but send along it also the opposite wave (equal in amplitude, but opposite in phase) and the string is again still: the possible always implies its opposite, and the ultimate of all things is the stillness of unlimited potentiality (Böhme’s ‘eternal stillness outside nature’). Since the human mind reaches into and is lost in that stillness, the more holistic an imaginative experience is, the more the mind is imbued with stillness and silence.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter
said Keats, echoing Plotinus’s

Harmonies unheard in sound create the harmonies we hear and wake the Soul to the consciousness of beauty, showing it the one essence in another kind. (I.6.p.59)

Holistic experience is intrinsically joyful, the ‘disagreeables evaporate’ as the mind works at a higher power through art, just as a flash of holistic insight produces joy in the scientist or, as Poincaré pointed out, in the mathematician. The range of art, however, because of its overt subjectivity and emotional pull, is greater, its imaginative appeal broader and its impact more immediately powerful. Myth is akin to art, for it is the art-form and mental history of a people, its literature art and religion in seed form, and when the communal mind finds an individual artist attuned to its inspiration this becomes embodied in the major art of a culture. The deep experience of great art always produces stillness, silence, but not all silences are the same; the silence is coloured by what has been experienced, though that experience has been transcended. The mind has moved, our sense of identity has moved — we are ‘taken out of ourselves’. The silence is completion and potentiality, ‘neither arrest nor movement’ in Eliot’s words, an inkling of the void in the centre of the hub where the spokes of the turning world are at rest.

Notes

Effortless Being: The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, trans. Alistair Shearer (Wildwood House, 1982). Alistair Shearer acknowledges his debt to Maharishi Mahesh Yoga for his understanding of the Sutras, and I would also like to acknowledge my own debt to the depth of experience and clarity of understanding given by that best of teachers.

Within all the religious traditions there is also awareness of the need to pass beyond material fact and intellectual formulation:

The Tathagata has no formulated teaching to enunciate.... Truth is uncontainable and inexpressible. It neither is nor is it not.

Thus it is that this unformulated Principle is the foundation of the different systems of all the sages.

Yet,

The man in whom the Consummation of Incomparable Enlightenment dawns does not affirm concerning any formula that it is finally extinguished. 

(Diamond Sutra, VII and XXVII)

References are to Śrī Śankarācārya Vivekacūḍāmaṇi, trans. Swami Madhavananda (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1978).
GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

Rackwick: A Child's Scrapbook

(to Alan)

The valley was a green jar,
corn crammed

The green bowl
brimmed with milk, honey, fish-oil

Once, the green jar
tilted at sixteen hungry doors

Sealed in the jar now
dust of old laughter and grief

They say, the jar flawed
with heaviness of coins

Long fallen, the jar-shards
half hidden in rushes

Hills tell old stories. Cliffs
are poets with harps

Brightnesses broached –
shoal, peatbog, sheaves

Waver west, fish, with moon and stars.
The sun's a cornstalk

* 

'Every day,' says the sea
'I count shell and wrack.'
Stone in the burn
counts millions of urgent waterdrops

The burn numbers
roots, clouds, trout.

'In my pocket,' says the cloud,
'a thousand silver coins.'

The rose
spills incense and cold curls, a candle

Worm shares with lark
charlock, broken gold

'Soon now,' sang the peat in the wind
'I'll wear a yellow dress'

Welcome, eagle. That bird
is home after a hundred years

Buttercup, iris, clover
idle in troops at the sun's door

Cornstalk cries, I'm the heir,
first child of the sun-king!

The shy worm, 'I toil
in a cellar of the king's castle'

Thugs are abroad with knives in July
- clegs!

Yes, bandits too with rows of knives in their mouths
- rats!
Mouse, timid thief
unlocking stone to get to butter and candles

‘No rose this,’ sang
the bee in the rusted barb

Has a lark
woken in a bed of nettles, ever?

I wonder, does the butterfly
say hullo to the spider?

Listen – plop! – a trout
has had a word with a cornstalk

Oh, bee
to die in those cold white flames! . . .

NEIL CURRY

Poppy Heads

There is, it seems, no poppy seed so old
That given a drop of water and some warmth
It will not flower again, breaking the dream
Of its opiate sleep to send new fancies
Shimmering along the blood. After twenty
Centuries, when smart industrialists
Moved back into the silver mines at Laurium
To pocket up the banks of spoil heaps,
There was a moment’s hesitation

In the dust, then wild and exotic
Poppy buds came powering up – strange sons
And daughters of blooms that Pliny must have known,
And would have seen stamped out in tesserae
Upon the Aventine, and on the portly
Bellies of black amphorae: Ceres' sign:
Shocks of sheer scarlet in a yellow heat
That twined through stooks and burned against the blue:
Manna for the mind beside the body’s bread.

But then what was manna? The word was no more
Than a mute echo that tried to give
A miracle a name. All they could tell
Was that it came after the quails had flown in
With the falling of the dusk and settled
Over the Wilderness of Sin: a gift
From an otherwise indifferent night
In answer to their needs, their dream; and now
An image of the fulfilment of a dream.

For dreams are not caught in the dissonant
Thickets of language, nor strung on time’s links;
They come to us with all the inseminate
Anarchy of the image, and every mote
Of the past concurrent, so wherever
A poppy head has nodded in the world
Some seed may lie waiting and from the pit of night
Will delight, bewilder or admonish us
With the ambiguous innocence that is its power.
**Kingfisher**

If Christ our king could
In the ammoniac stench of the stable
Suffer at his nativity to be
Neighbour to slow-breathing beasts,

Then small wonder that the king-fisher's spark should be struck
In a damp underworld of willow root and worm
Where vole and water rat splash,

For once the shells split and sapphire
And fire-opal fledge in their filth
And six or seven small spurts of flame
Are tumbled out into the dazzle,

Then earth, air, fire and water meet
In a perfection of balance, trafficking,
Like prayer, between this world and that.
And isn't it then that their mother's

Fabled and other self is said to brood
On a nest of bones, calming the waters,
And granting us glimpses of Eden
In those Mary-blue halcyon days?
JEREMY REED

Visiting Hours

I try to reach you who reverse in years
to a child lost inside a labyrinth,
and it seems you're my son now, not father,
and it is I, who must answer questions
by a frightened bedside, and allay fears
that root in you, and by circumvention
of facts, pretend that it's an interval
of rest you're here for, not a terminal
illness; and that this bed, this window pane
dustily framing the roofs of central
London, is the last corner that you'll know
on earth; the ward for four, circumspect walls
of white, the soundless television screen
that's on all day, and the routinal pills

that deaden your cancer's anabasis,
steroids to reduce brain inflammation.
Fifty eight years without a day's illness,
and now your helplessness is of a child's
fumbling for speech, for a balance that's gone,
and leaves you without co-ordination,
seeking sleep, like a diver gone on down
to find an exit that was always there,
but never used. Each day you go deeper
in that exploration, while we in air
can only call you from a great distance,
and meet you when you surface. Who's farther
from who? I only know you need me here,

as once you comforted me in nightmare.
You hold my hand as though I were a spool playing you out lifeline with each visit, hoping that thread's unbreakable. Your pull is vibrant at all hours, and the welts cut each time you awake to panic or fear, and I can sense your knowledge that you are a hooked salmon who can't jump from the pool.

I don't presume to understand why you should die of proliferating wrong cells, in the city you feared, almost in view of my small flat. You who so hated crowds, and loss of privacy, must lie fearful of each intrusion, each nurse's footfall, cowed like a fish exposed in a glass bowl.

And we who visit, must each day renew the strength we foster in you for the hours when we're not here, and the cornflower blue of the sky stands still outside your window. Beside your bed are the summer flowers we bring, mauve night-stock, pinks, sweet william: they are for you life-giving scent, colour, whose days are long, and punctuated by small things which seem irrelevant to one perplexed by his life's mutation. We die to negate our own vulnerability, and spider-like dismantle our old webs, sure of a stronger fabric, and each day I sense the weakening of your life-thread in the hand that I squeeze on departure. Your blood and mine, and yet how disparate our characters, opposite our natures, and yet how one. All the discord of years, my seemingly interminable furors, you pacified—love makes us soon forget. Each time I see you so, I fight back tears.
The prospect narrows. Standing in the sun,
I see my own death frozen in a beam,
as it will isolate me years later,
and I without offspring. You are my son
in these last weeks. A huge jet lifts over
the city; then the ward reverts to calm.
I too fear the end of visiting hours.

* Four stanzas – 6 to 9 – were omitted from the version of this poem included in By the Fisheries (reviewed on p. 274) and we publish the complete version for the first time.

Hölderlin

I
The grape is perfect, its translucent skin
embodies months of sunlight, and he holds
the bead up to his eye; the fire's within;
the juice is a potion of the sun's gold.

At Tübingen the yard rings with hammers,
an apprentice saws and his clear sweat prints
the smooth grain of the wood. His voice stammers
if the distracted poet seems to hint

that brute strength is no equal to the mind.
Who is this man returning from long walks,
his pockets crammed with whatever he finds,
grass-switches, berries, bird's feathers, a stone,
his reason balanced on a hairfine stalk,
his talks to someone but he is alone.
II
A white-washed amphitheatrical room
frugal of ornaments is where he sits
and works upon a piano without tune.
It's the voice in his mind he tries to hit
so violently a key will strike it dumb.
After daring the great lakes of the sky
he is a child again and sucks his thumb;
words won't stay still, they buzz round like a fly
he has to trap; sometimes they group for him
in powerful clusters and shape a fragment.
He tucks his head as though a violin
was speaking from his shoulder. Now he sees
the crystallization of a moment.
The sunlight vibrates with an orange bee.

III
Anonymity is what he most craves,
changing his name each week, divorced in time
from work he disowns, he's come to believe
he'll escape death by conceding his lines
to someone else. The god will have him live
as Scardanelli. They shake the plums down
from the household tree, so little survives.
In death the green leaf wears a golden crown.
He paces back and forth inside his room,
his fingernails have hardened to black shells,
his coat's flecked silver by the harvest moon,
and his eye telescopes on someone who's
shrunk to a midget, and startles as a bell
breaks from his head and peals across the view.
Migration

Now is the time of migration, a mist
confirms a seasonal stillness to the air;
birds spar and dart unable to resist
the quickening assertion of that pole
which twice yearly channels them through air-flues
over continents that might be atolls
their homing stimuli's so accurate.
The air's electric with their shrill furor;
a swallow's zig-zag spiral to a gate
to strum back to the trilling of a wire
vibrant with birds, denotes the urgency
each has acquired, crisp as the crackling fire
a bee emblazons. The season's turned gold,
the russet plumage of the equinox
is speckled chartreuse and toad-brown, a cold
drops early. Bird after bird in pre-flight
expectation's nervously triggered to go,
migrants who'll fly unswervingly by night
as well as day, caught in the powerful sweep
a lighthouse throws, or seen as silhouettes
against the lunar disk. I fish the deep
channels inshore, and apprehensively.
Conger and dogfish might begin to bark
from the oil-black. The bay's a flat ivy-
leaf darkening from an ink-tinctured sea.
Everything groups before the air flickers
with an increased, audible vibrancy,
and then they're gone, the swallows first, gone high,
their bodies kindled by such energy
their blue shapes seem part of the moving sky.

Bluebells

(for Senta)

These I have waited for
tremulous flower bells,
vibrant to the spider's ear,
mauve silk to the wind
ferreting the wood's floor,
a baroque embellish,
each veined with the kingfisher streak in a jay's wing.

The slope's almost vertical,
snowed with wild garlic,
the bee here's too loud
a black furry ball
so orange he's scarlet.
The gadfly's kimono
handclaps a rainbow.

Wait, and the fragrance
of bluebells diffuses,
subtle, then split on the wind,
particular, bending the head
to the source, the distinction
that adds blue to the mind,
itsel a direction
back to how many times
I have knelt to that flame,
imbibed the distillation,
and named it recollection.
Lilac

Suddenly you've come to stay
beside the hawthorn and the may,
smoke-blue, plum-red and indigo,
a rarer freak of white you scent
the crystal aftermath of rain,
subtler than hyacinth, truer
than bluebells, less than lavender,
vanilla touched with rose might show
the scent's inimitably yours,
bushed out where tall hemlock grows.

Each year I'm dismayed to find
the perfume's stayed in my mind,
inexplicably refined
to a mood, a time, a place,
secret in my blood all year,
dormant until lilac climbs
the sheltered side of the sea wall,
blue against flinty blue appears,
while the thunder of surf makes
a horizontal waterfall.
Wild Children

Everywhere, plain, savanna, desert,
Mountain valley, forest, jungle,
Open space, or enclosed thicket,
Outside the cluttered skull
Experiences me.

My kin are fallen from nomadic
Carriers left to bleach on sand
Or where they lie. Some adopt
An aspect of grass.
Changeling survives.

What we do not know or understand
Distracts us. In my living
There is no past nor any future.
As I wake or sleep is all one.
Light and dark limit me.

My tongue is tuned about me,
My voice changes pitch and meaning.
I have been wolf-boy of Kronstadt,
I have been bear-girl of Karpfen:
And alone, alone. Aveyron.

I keep pace with Sahara gazelle
And follow law of pack and herd.
Under fur and muscle I live
Nudging my way for crop or kill —
And at the waterhole.
Still, so still, my changing skin quivers
And my eyes picture things inward I
Cannot understand, cannot growl at,
Cannot leap or run from, can only glimpse
Against sky, water, or forest tree.

I have lived as wolf, as bear, as pig,
As monkey, ostrich, as leopard, as gazelle,
With these I have been known. And there is more,
O so much more. Both before now, now. Now
And . . .

I curl in a womb. I kneel
Before the altered aspect of my gods:
Into whom am I seeking to change?
One by one my identities bloom
That one shall flower.

I have been run to death. Poisoned. Starved.
Neglected. Confined. I have been trodden
Down and hoisted by the neck.
I have acted thus.
I have been my own hunter.

I have been found. Netted. Trapped
And hamstrung. Exhibited. But I have begun again.
I changed. I fled. I broke the circle.
I have stared into the mirror
And escaped.
To read through the various critical and other appreciations that have been written on Cavafy and his work is to be made aware of how remarkably consistent a portrait of the poet has been built up over the years. It is as if the various protagonists in Cavafy's poems, and the attitudes and moods which they express, are all taken to be reflections of Cavafy's own personality, so that it is really Cavafy himself speaking through these multiple masks and acting as the generic hero of his own poetry. Thus, one of the first to write about Cavafy, the novelist E. M. Forster, speaks in one of his essays of Cavafy's 'amoral mind'. 'Courage and cowardice,' Forster writes, 'are equally interesting to his amoral mind because he sees in both of them opportunities for sensation.' In another place Forster emphasizes that what he [Cavafy] envies is 'the power to snatch sensation, to triumph over the moment even if remorse ensues.' And he characterizes Cavafy as 'a paganizing Greek'.

Here, then, right from the start, Cavafy the man is being placed firmly within the fin de siècle tradition of aesthetic decadence, for which the purpose of life is consumed in the search for sensation and for which art is little more than a means of re-evoking sensations, so much so that it is little more than a superior kind of aphrodisiac. In this view, Cavafy is a kind of prolongation of figures like Walter Pater, Gautier, Oscar Wilde and Huysmans.

Marguerite Yourcenar slightly changes the emphasis, but she does not radically displace the perspective. For her, what characterizes Cavafy above all is his freedom from illusions and his resignation. Thus she sees the poem, Ithaka, as a defence in favour of hope, and a warning against the illusions of disillusion. The City, on the other hand, is 'a lesson in resignation' and also 'the bitter statement of one's human powerlessness to escape from oneself'. 'It is always important,' she writes, 'to learn whether, in the final analysis, the work of a poet accepts, or does not accept, the universal order, and it is precisely by an admirable absence of illusions and of revolt that this is characterized.'
On this basis Marguerite Yourcenar reaches the conclusion that Cavafy is, not a paganizing Greek, as Forster would have him, but a Christian. 'It is this same absence of revolt,' she writes, 'that permits Cavafy to move with ease within the embrace of his Orthodox heritage and makes him, definitively, a Christian.'

I do not know how familiar Marguerite Yourcenar is with this Orthodox heritage, but if she imagines that it is characterized by the kind of resignation to one's mortal self and its circumstances and weaknesses, and by the renunciation of the search to enjoy the good life here and now, which she takes to be the lesson of The City, I would suggest that she is confusing Orthodoxy with something more like Stoicism. The Orthodox Christian is urged to get out of the temporal city as soon as he can: 'For here we have no abiding city, but we seek the city that is to come', the city 'that is above' and is not in bondage. The lesson which Marguerite Yourcenar takes to be that of The City is certainly not Christian, whatever else it may be. But that lesson may not be the one that Cavafy had any intention of giving.

The Greek poet, George Seferis, in his long study, 'Cavafy and Eliot - A Comparison', recalls a remark that Rémy de Gourmont made about Flaubert: 'Flaubert incorporated all his sensitivity in his work. Apart from his books, he is of very little interest.' Seferis goes on to say that 'this phrase should be applied in its entirety to Cavafy, if we want to understand him. In a life span of seventy years he [Cavafy] did nothing else but distil himself, drop by drop, into his hundred and fifty or so poems.' Later in the same essay Seferis remarks: 'There are two ways in which we can examine the personal life of an artist: one is by means of anecdotes, surprises, jokes, medical reports; the other is by humbly trying to see how the poet incorporates his perishable life in his work.' Seferis adds that he prefers the second way.

Thus once again it is assumed that the poetry, or the attitudes and moods and stances adopted in the poetry, provide the clue to Cavafy's own psychology. As Seferis puts it, the symbols of Cavafy's 'waste land' 'are inside him; they are himself'. This means that if one deciphers these symbols one will at the same time be deciphering Cavafy's own inner world. The question at once arises: what are, according to Seferis, the main features of the outer landscape - the poetry - which, being reflections of the poet's own inner landscape, will allow us to perceive what this latter is?
Ever since his early years', Seferis writes, 'his [Cavafy's] whole work presents a web of trickeries, traps, ruses, machinations, fears, suspicions, faulty reckonings, mistaken expectations, vain efforts. His gods mock, deride and jeer, his characters are deceitful and at the same time mere playthings in the hands of the gods, of time, of fate, of luck. . . . The permanent element that is endlessly stressed by Cavafy . . . is deception, derision. The panorama unfolded by his poems is a world of dupes and swindlers.' Moreover, from the 'waste land' of this panorama— not so much now one of amorality and aestheticism as one of Mephistophelian immorality and agnosticism—there is, Seferis says, no exit. 'For in the ultimate analysis of his poetry only two symbols are left: the dead Adonis, and Proteus, old, exhausted and sick. . . . In the kingdom of the Alexandrian there is no "pure knight" to symbolize the fight between good and evil.' 'There is no saving faith, only a faith in art, and this serves as a kind of narcotic elixir in the general betrayal.' These, then, are according to Seferis the features of the poetry in which Cavafy reveals the features of his own portrait. They extend the image that has already been proposed by Forster and Yourcenar.

Lawrence Durrell, in his Alexandria Quartet, extends this image a stage further. In the Alexandria Quartet Cavafy is the model for the 'old poet' and as such is identified with that whole turbid atmosphere of sexuality and obscenity, of deracination and failure, within which Durrell's characters live, move and have their being. 'I have come here,' says the narrator of Justine, 'in order completely to rebuild this city [Alexandria] in my brain—melancholy provinces which the old man [Cavafy] saw as full of the "black ruins" of his life.' The reference is again to Cavafy's poem The City, and again it is assumed that in this poem Cavafy is talking about himself and that the 'black ruins' of which it speaks are those of his own life. And what, according to Durrell, is the character of these 'black ruins' which are supposed to be the ruins of Cavafy's own life, and what is the spirit of this Alexandria that he is supposed to epitomize?

'The sexual provender', Durrell writes, 'which lies to hand is staggering in its variety and profusion. . . . The symbolic lovers of the Hellenic world are replaced by something different, something subtly androgynous, inverted upon itself. The Orient cannot rejoice in the sweet anarchy of the body— for it has outstripped the body.' None the
less, a few paragraphs later we learn that 'the sulking bodies of the young begin to hunt for a fellow nakedness, and in those little cafés where Balthazar went so often with the old poet of the city [with, that is to say, Cavafy], the boys stir uneasily at their backgammon under the petrol-lamps; disturbed by this dry desert wind – so unromantic, so unconfiding – stir, and turn to watch every stranger. They struggle for breath and in every summer kiss they can detect the taste of quicklime. . ..' 7

This, then, is the seedy fetid domain of which Cavafy, in Durrell's Quartet, is the presiding genius and whose features are, so to say, his own self-portrait writ large: a winepress from which emerge only those who are sick, only those who have been deeply wounded in their sex.

Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greek novelist, adds his contribution to the same portrait. 8 He describes Cavafy's physiognomy. It is, he says, 'now all Mephistophelian and ironic . . . and now . . . all delicacy, decadence and languor.' He calls Cavafy 'a complex, over-burdened soul of holy decadence'. He is 'among the final flowers of civilization' and possesses 'all the typical characteristics of an outstanding decadent – wise, ironic, sensualist, sorcerer, full of memory'.

As they were for Seferis, so for W. H. Auden Cavafy's poems are self-disclosures, revelations of a person with a unique perspective on the world. 9 Auden affirms that one of Cavafy's great qualities is his honesty. One duty of a poem, Auden writes, is to bear witness to the truth; and Cavafy, in his erotic poems, for instance, is writing the truth about his own erotic experiences. One has to take these erotic poems as self-confessions. Indeed – and this is rather extraordinary – the only criticism that might be made, according to Auden, 'is one that applies to all poets, namely, that Cavafy does not, perhaps, fully appreciate his exceptional good fortune in being someone who can transmute into valuable poetry experiences which, for those who lack this power, may be trivial or even harmful.' In the end, especially if one is reading Cavafy in translation, all one is left with is the sensibility, and this one either likes or dislikes. Auden's conclusion, curiously enough, is much the same as that of Seferis.

It is also very much the conclusion of another critic, Rex Warner, who speaks of Cavafy's world as one that most English schoolmasters would describe as 'decadent'. 10 It is, Warner writes, 'a world without any of the obvious epic, lyric or tragic grandeurs. Yet it is a world that
existed and exists. It can be examined minutely and dispassionately. And to this examination Cavafy brings a peculiar point of view together with a singular integrity. In commenting on the poem, Waiting for the Barbarians, Warner again emphasizes that the world it describes is one that might be called ‘decadent’: ‘that world where a rich and civilized people await with keen curiosity the invasion of a barbarian army, not, it seems, concerned to repel the invaders by force, but interested in the situation. . . . It is a scene very different from what could be imagined of Marathon or of Salamis, yet Cavafy’s art is such that we are not out of sympathy with the crowd of sightseers either in their curiosity or in its disappointment. These studies of the unheroic have something of their own which, while it is not heroism, is a kind of dignity. It is the dignity and pathos of the real life which persists under whatever changes of government.’ 

Once again there is the assumption that Cavafy is in sympathy with the decadence which such a poem as Waiting for the Barbarians is said to express. It is something that he condones, something in which he finds ‘a kind of truth, which has a peculiar relevance for the modern world’. And Warner concludes: ‘He [Cavafy] is aware of all kinds of complexity, but not for that reason tempted into hysteria, exaggeration or over-emphasis. His quiet style and his choice of subject exactly represent his genius which accepts life without extravagant illusions. Yet in this particular act of acceptance he has somehow transformed what was there before. He has not only taken and described but created and discovered a world.’

It is to be noted that this world that Cavafy has created and discovered has for Warner ‘a peculiar relevance for the modern world’. Others, too, stress how contemporary it is or how it is a world in which modern man can immediately recognize himself. Thus an American critic, the poet Richard Howard, writes: ‘He [Cavafy] is the first Greek poet since Euripides we read with that kind of demonic self-recognition. . . . Cavafy is one of the great writers we turn to . . . not because he delights us or because he demands our attention, . . . but because he comes to terms, answerable terms, with that relation to our lives we most mistrust and evade – the relation to loss.’ And for another American critic Cavafy’s state of mind, which he describes as the Alexandrian state of mind, is ‘a metaphor for the attitude of modern Western man’. This critic then goes on to characterize this
mind in terms with which we are by now more or less familiar: outwardly, towards politics, action and so on, its stance is based on the maximum avoidance of pain, while inwardly, towards one's private life, and especially towards one's sexual life, it is based on the maximum degree of pleasure, so much so that the avoidance of pain and the selection of pleasure is the basis of morality. In fact, perhaps in the end there is no morality, or at least there is an equivalence of all moral values. We are back virtually where we started, with Forster's remark about Cavafy's 'amoral mind' and his placing of Cavafy firmly within the fin de siècle tradition of aesthetic and agnostic decadence.

Thus over the years, largely on the basis of the assumption that one can correlate the attitudes expressed in the poetry with Cavafy's own attitudes and values, this composite yet remarkably consistent portrait of Cavafy has been built up, a riddle and a key, and a kind of counterpart and confirmation of the poetry itself. And the quality that most characterizes this portrait is summarized in the words 'decadence' and 'decadent'.

I do not want simply to assert that this portrait is a mistaken one. But I think it should be regarded with considerable caution, not to say suspicion. First of all, what exactly is meant by saying that Cavafy expresses the times in which he lives, or expresses the needs, pains, frustrations, anxieties and so on of modern man? A poet, if he is truly a poet, from the start creates his own time, a time which is radically at odds with and quite independent of the time in which he happens to live historically speaking — that anonymous faceless time in which most of us forget ourselves in pursuits that are as fugitive as they are fruitless.

Similarly, his concern is with man — with the mystery of human nature — not with modern man as though he constituted virtually a separate species, essentially different from the man who lived a thousand or two thousand years ago. This species — modern man — is the invention of sociologists and such like, who operate in ways other than those of poets.

In fact, may not the desire to find in a poet a contemporaneousness that allows us to identify ourselves with him, or to recognize ourselves in him, often conceal a subtle form of egotism? By finding in a poet, or thinking that we find in him, echoes of our own states of mind, we are led to attribute to these states of mind the kind of validity and sanction we are only too anxious to give them. We turn the poet into a victim of
our own desire for self-verification, saying to ourselves that if he voices our hopes and fears, and expresses our attitudes, and he is a great poet, then we too must be of some account, and our attitudes and our hopes and fears must be of some consequence and value. They are given a pedigree. In other words, we identify with the poet because we think that he flatters and confirms our weaknesses.

I suspect that Cavafy has been a particular victim of this process. Indeed, I suspect that it is largely this that has made him so popular. On the surface he doesn’t challenge us anywhere. On the contrary, it seems that the reverse is true: he appears to condone everything that is most depraved about us: our permissiveness and promiscuity, our duplicity and evasion, our sense of powerlessness before fate and time, our nostalgia and self-deception, our day-dreaming and self-pity: all those features of disequilibrium and obliquity so characteristic of l’homme moyen sensuel, of the really average citizen of our rundown disorientated world with its showy high ideals and its snowy guiltlessness, as intent on disowning the past as it is disabused and cynical about an already bankrupt future because, through what we are pleased to call our agnosticism, we have already disowned and made bankrupt our own true identities as human beings.

All this we can find represented in Cavafy’s poems; and because Cavafy appears to refrain from passing judgement on the actions and attitudes of his protagonists, we take it that he connives in them, and even approves of them, and that in fact they are all self-disclosures about himself and about his own attitudes and values. Consequently we take it that indirectly therefore he connives in and approves of our own weaknesses and failings. And this, as I have said, is very flattering and reassuring for us, and is why I think that our attempts to see in Cavafy a poet of our times may simply conceal a subtle form of egotism.

More important than this, however, is the whole tendency to read in Cavafy’s poems Cavafy’s own disclosures about himself, the whole thesis that a poet, to use the words of Seferis, ‘incorporates his perishable life in his works’. I think we have come to subscribe to this thesis because we now take it more or less as axiomatic that all forms of art are forms of self-expression and so are all to a greater or lesser extent self-confessional and autobiographic. We tend to forget that perhaps most of the world’s great art, so far from being self-expression – the overflowing of one’s sensibility into pools of verbal or visual
discourse — is produced only on condition that the artist has gone beyond the need to express himself as the particular individual so-and-so in the forms of his art. Testimonies about poets like Dionysios Solomos, to the effect that his work was ‘a spontaneous uninterrupted endeavour to extinguish his individuality in absolute truth’, strike us as strange, if for no better reason than that we no longer believe that there is any absolute truth within which we can extinguish our individualities. So because a poem, or a personage in a poem, expresses such and such a point of view, we tend to assume that the poet approves of it or is making a declaration of his own beliefs and values.

Yet it is a rash assumption, and one that Cavafy explicitly dissociates himself from and even derides. It is the kind of assumption that leads us to extract some statement from, say, a play by Shakespeare and attribute the sentiment it expresses to Shakespeare’s own understanding of things. We quote the opening lines of Twelfth Night — ‘If music be the food of love, play on; give me excess of it’ — as if Shakespeare thought that music was or should be the food of love; and we forget that the whole tenor of the play is to make it clear to us that music is not the food of love at all and that those who think it is think like that because they lack understanding of the true nature of love. Or we single out lines like: ‘As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport’, and we say that this is evidence of Shakespeare’s fatalism and of his sense that human beings are the playthings of fate; and we forget that the whole tenor of the play from which these lines are taken — King Lear — is to make it clear to us that this is not the case at all and that the opposite is true.

Similarly, we take a poem by Cavafy — say, From the School of the Renowned Philosopher, a poem which speaks of a youth who for two years studied with the Neoplatonic philosopher, Ammonios Sakkas, but was bored both by the philosophy and by Sakkas; who then went into politics, but couldn’t stand the ignorance and uncouthness of his colleagues; who thought of becoming a Christian, but gave up the idea because his pagan parents might otherwise have cut off his allowance; and who, finally, in order to relieve himself of his boredom — in order ‘to do something’ — purveys his handsome figure through the brothels of Alexandria, an occupation he can indulge in, he estimates, for at least a further ten years. We read this poem, and because it is written in
Cavafy's urbane and humorous style we assume that he too thinks it is all rather witty and clever and amusing; that he too thinks that it is quite in order and even to be commended that a young man should be bored by Neoplatonism, should be cynical about politics, should treat religion as a mere mask which he can put on or take off as it suits his worldly purposes, and should be willing to debauch his body — which Cavafy calls 'a divine gift' — because he has nothing better to do.

So conditioned are we — so brainwashed, one might almost say — that it never occurs to us that like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Cavafy may be whispering 'The horror! The horror!' as he contemplates the spectacle of this youth who, having rejected what might have given his life some dignity and purpose — the noble teaching of the man known as the Socrates of Neoplatonism, who numbered among his pupils both Plotinus and Origen — is carried along by an insatiable infernal rhythm in a vain search to fill the appalling emptiness of his life and who can only end up, short of a miracle, in one of the hells of fatuity and self-destruction which he himself has chosen.

Or we read in another poem, *One of their Gods*, (p.189) of a figure — 'tall, extremely handsome . . . his hair black and perfumed' — who moves at dusk through the streets of Seleukia on his way to the red-light district — 'the quarter that lives/only at night, with orgies and debauchery' — and in whom some of the citizens think they recognize one of their gods; and again we take it that for Cavafy there is nothing untoward in this, nothing which he regards as demeaning, and that indeed it is something which his 'amoral mind' finds entirely sympathetic. As a result we do not even pause to ask ourselves why Cavafy entitles the poem *One of their Gods*, or to think that what he may want to indicate by this 'their' is his own dissociation from the mentality of a people that has sunk so low in the scale of human ignorance that they are even capable of supposing that a divine being enjoys indulging in the same kind of spurious sexuality as that which clearly vitiates their own city. In short, we do not even pause to think that he is one of 'their' gods precisely because he is a faithful image of their own degradation.

Then there is the poem to which we have already had occasion to refer, *The City*, (p.189) — the poem in which Marguerite Yourcenar perceives that lesson in resignation, the statement of one's powerlessness to escape from oneself, that leads her to call Cavafy a Christian;
and in which, according to Lawrence Durrell, the ‘black ruins’—‘the black ruins of my life, here, where I’ve spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally’—refer to the ruins of Cavafy’s own life. Apart from the fact that such resignation and sense of powerlessness before one’s fate have, as I have already pointed out, nothing Christian about them, according to what testimony does one attribute this stance to Cavafy himself? According to what testimony does one say that he approves of it, or that the ‘black ruins’ are those of his own life? So far as I can see there is absolutely no evidence to show that this is a confessional poem or a poem of self-disclosure, or that Cavafy is speaking of his own incapacity to do anything about his life. He does not even use the personal pronoun ‘I’. It is someone else who speaks—you, hypocrite lecteur perhaps, but by no means necessarily mon semblable, mon frère. It is you who Cavafy says will not escape from this deathtrap in which you have imprisoned yourself—imprisoned yourself through your lack of faith, lack of courage, and because, quite simply, you have given in.

You have not even attained the first step in the process of self-emancipation— that step which already, as Cavafy says in another poem, ‘is a long way above the ordinary world’. Instead, you are one of those— one of the many, not one of the few, one of the élite, as Cavafy felt himself to be—who have submitted to the norms of this ordinary world, and have found a haven in it ‘where they may thoughtless sleep away their days’ and ‘rot on the pavement where thou rottestd half’. As for the ‘black ruins’ being those of Cavafy’s own life: why should a man who attributed to himself the qualities of a born aristocrat and who was superbly conscious of the permanent value of his poetry talk about the ‘black ruins’ of his life? These ‘black ruins’ are on the contrary those of your life, of the life you have wasted and destroyed so pathetically.

Moreover, consider the second stanza of this poem, The City:

You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore.
This city will always pursue you.
You’ll walk the same streets, grow old
In the same neighbourhood, grow grey in these same houses.
You’ll always end up in this city. Don’t hope for things elsewhere.
There’s no ship for you, there’s no road.
Now you’ve wasted your life here, in this small corner,
You’ve destroyed it everywhere in the world.
Why should these lines be taken as a response in an inner dialogue in which Cavafy is communing with himself and condoning a state of despair and helpless resignation? Are they not much more a statement, not unmixed with dismissive scorn and contempt, of the literal fate that awaits all those self-indulgent day-dreamers who are always talking about getting out of the rut into which they have sunk themselves but who in reality, as Cavafy knows only too well, will never get out of anything, and will merely continue on their futile course of self-corruption?

A similar bias of interpretation — or misinterpretation — has also been applied to that other poem to which reference has already been made and which is often said to epitomize Cavafy's world-view, or at least one aspect of it: Waiting for the Barbarians (p.190). This poem is of course on a theme that is part and parcel of the decadent predicament: I mean the way in which by a strange dialectic inherent in the decadent mind itself, that mind is led to invoke its own demise and the doom of its own society and culture, both as a moral retribution and as the only viable biological alternative for the continuation of the human race. In other words, the decadent, having closed up the channels of communication which could lead him beyond this world — having denied all transcendent meaning to phenomena and even to history itself — and at the same time having lost the vital power which he might have drawn from some contact with nature, has in the process atrophied his capacity for life. But because he has atrophied his capacity for life, he may not on that account deny life. On the contrary, he may well long for it more intensely. Yet because he himself has never really been alive, and now knows that he will never live, he projects this longing on to those he sees as being the expression of natural forces, the raw power of nature before it has been thinned out and etiolated by the over-sophistication of a society that pays more attention to the vanities of life than to its essentials. And this power is identified with barbarism and the barbarians.

Hence there is a strange collusion between the decadent and the barbarian, a strange brotherhood. The decadent, realizing that he is incapable of taking up arms against any sea of troubles, longs for someone or something that will take the burden of his self-betrayal away from him. That is why he not only passively accepts the coming of the barbarians: he actively welcomes it — welcomes it because by
turning him into a victim or a scapegoat, as well as into an accomplice, it is the one thing left that can give some meaning to his life. That it gives this meaning to his life by effectively removing him from the stage of history – on which anyhow he has for long refused to play any active or responsible part – is consistent with his tragedy: at least he suffers his own nemesis willingly, and by so doing contributes to the workings of that unpersuadable justice which his own abdication from his destiny as a human being has set in motion.

Cavafy well understood all this and he gives expression to it in his Waiting for the Barbarians. Indeed, in his final twist to the poem – that ‘there are no barbarians any longer’ – he takes away from the decadent even the possibility of giving his life some meaning by being the willing accomplice of his own demise. He is now left with nothing but his impotence, his inanity and his self-betrayal, burdens already intolerable to him.

Yet the fact that Cavafy delineates all this so well does not in the least mean that he does not regard such a state of mind as deplorable. Somewhere in his writings Seferis speaks of a mechanism of justice which may be not only a moral law but even a physical law, a law exemplified in the Herakleitian axiom: ‘The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of Justice, will find him out’; and it is in accordance with this ‘mechanism of justice’ that certain states of mind or being call down on themselves their own punishment. Before one talks too readily of Cavafy’s resignation, his amoral mind, his despair and so on, I wonder whether one should not take into account the possibility that behind his seeming tolerance and detachment does not lie an awareness of precisely such a mechanism of justice as that of which Seferis speaks; and whether consequently a poem like Waiting for the Barbarians is, not just an ironic summation of a mood or a semi-humorous evocation of an all-too-human predicament, but a masterful exposure of the immense triviality of people who, far from having anything dignified about them, as Rex Warner claims, disown responsibility for their lives and their history and have become virtually superfluous as human beings. It must be remembered that if Cavafy had read the fin de siècle writers who were the literary fashion at the time when he was finding his poetic voice, he was also a close reader of Gibbon, whose values, inherited from the heroic centuries of ancient Greece and Rome by way of the Renaissance, were
totally other than those promoted by the writers to whom decadence made such an appeal.

At this point, if not at some earlier point, it may be objected that if Cavafy's historical and philosophical poems are open to interpretations that show them to be quite other than merely self-exposures of a decadent mentality that is supposed to be Cavafy's own, the same cannot be said of the poems that belong to the third major category into which he himself divided his work, namely, the erotic poems. Here, it could be said, there is no ambiguity. The poems are overtly confessional. Often they are written in the first person singular. They are full of descriptive details that could be supplied only from the poet's personal recollection. And do they not manifest all the typical symptoms of an eroticism that can only be termed decadent, not to say Mephistophelian? In other words, whatever their value as poetry, are not the experiences to which for the most part they relate, and the sense they reveal of the significance of these experiences, both 'trivial and even harmful', as Auden puts it?

Yet, first, what is meant by 'decadence' in this particular context? The person for whom the realization of his own deepest being is a pursuit he can renounce only by consenting to what he knows to be a living death, will by the same token aspire to the highest possibilities of life. He will reject as unworthy all that demeans life or that hinders its highest realization. When Socrates delivers his first discourse on the theme of Eros and the erotic life in the Phaedrus, he covers his head, ashamed, as he later confesses, for the sin he was committing against the divine in speaking as though he had been 'brought up among sailors and had never seen a magnanimous love'; and he delivers his second discourse as a form of recantation, this time concentrating his whole being in his attempt to do justice to the reality of what he is talking about.

Such justice begins with the recognition that love — Eros — springs from the divine and, if pursued with the dedication, awe and seriousness which it will inspire in whoever is aware of its origin, has the capacity to lead the human lover back to the divine. Thus for the human lover Eros is a deifying force that is capable of actualizing his deepest and most personal reality. As such it imposes on the lover the need for eternity since, as Socrates puts it in the Symposium, Eros seeks not simply to possess the beloved object but to possess it for ever. A
love that does not awaken in the lover a desire for eternity is therefore, by these standards, not a genuine love. It is not something that touches his deepest and most personal being. True love, which we live as a necessity of our being, longs to be eternal because it presents us with the knowledge that short of eternity our love can never attain the fulfilment it demands. The law of Eros, if one can put it like this, is consequently something quite other than the mindless law of mere physical need. It is something quite other than what is limited to simple intoxication or feeling. It brings into play the whole substance of our destiny — of our destiny and that of the beloved. It is inextricably intertwined with the realization of the highest possibilities that are open to us in life.

The decadent or aesthete will share little or nothing of this way of looking at Eros and its possibilities. For him man is something merely temporal, transient and unstable. From the start he does not believe in the eternity of the erotic relationship into which he enters. He does not believe that man lives for eternity and that through an erotic relationship he is given the possibility of attaining it. Faithfulness and eternity for him have little or no meaning. He does not possess absolute values. Eros itself he does not regard as a gift from heaven. It is simply an intoxicating human feeling, stimulated at best by physical beauty and finding its fulfilment in physical pleasure. If his decadence becomes Mephistophelian — and the line of demarcation is often difficult to discern — then he will deny not only that love can be eternal but also its capacity to endure for long within time itself. Everything — every reality — must be fleeting. In fact, each moment has the limited sense of the merely momentary. The limited aspiration and the limited mind that characterize him are in their element in the simple moment: there is nothing real except that which is lost immediately. Thus the only fulfilment love can have is a momentary fulfilment. In this way he dissipates himself in the pursuit of the continually new, forgets himself in the variety of what are scarcely more than chance encounters, whose transience does not worry him. ‘Pauvre amoureux des pays chimériques’, he is always madly on the move in his search for the only form of satisfaction in which he thinks he can find rest. And if in the end his search is doomed to disappointment, this is only to be expected in a world that by definition can do no more than mirror the irony of its existence.
Do, then, Cavafy's erotic poems simply confirm the decadent aesthetic, even Mephistophelian stance of their author, in spite of the fact that other poems can be taken to point to a different kind of orientation? It is not difficult to single out such poems whose purpose, if it can be called that, appears to be no more than to recall sexual episodes that take place entirely in a vacuum, as the consequence of a chance meeting, and to be consumed almost as soon as they have arisen, without any real relationship being established between the persons engaged in them. Even when some such relationship is implied, there is no suggestion that the persons involved in it are lovers in the sense that they recognize any of the possibilities inherent in the true erotic relationship as we have spoken of it above. On the contrary, they often seem to reflect the unhappiness of the man who, lacking belief in the higher non-temporal possibilities of the relationship in which he is involved, loves consequently with a love that is not genuine and hence experiences in it only torment, not fulfilment: torment because life has taught him that time can give him neither happiness nor fulfilment, and yet the temporal dimension is the only one he is capable of recognizing. The very despair itself to which such a predicament may give rise can in such circumstances degenerate into little more than self-pity. For despair has meaning only when, side by side with the belief that the idea of eternity is deception, there none the less exists a deep longing for eternity. The persistence of such a longing, combined with a sense that the end of love would mean death, not merely in an empty sentimental way but as a literal fact, may give birth to faith in us and so lead to the recognition of non-temporal realities. In such a case, despair, which at first threatens to destroy everything, may turn into the means by which we recognize the possibility of creating, or recreating, everything. But when the longing for eternity has never arisen, or lapses, then despair does not possess even this significance.

Yet it would be unjust to Cavafy to regard his erotic poems as mere personal records of promiscuous sexual encounters whose potentiality is exhausted in the momentary, the aesthetic and the physical alone. It is not so simple. First of all, the question of whether or not these poems are autobiographical — and there is no way of proving that they are — is totally irrelevant to their purport and significance, just as the question of whether the kind of eroticism they evince is heterosexual
or homosexual is also irrelevant. Cavafy was far too self-conscious an artist, and far too aware of the integral and overall vision or ‘myth in progress’ to the expression of which all his poems in one way or another contributed, to permit into his canon poems that were merely occasional or merely recordings of episodes of his own private life. His erotic poems consequently have meaning only when seen within the context of the whole corpus of his work, because they issue from the same vision of life of which his other poetry is also the expression, and they cannot be at odds with this vision. They are thus statements – as impersonal as personal – in which may be discerned, by those who have eyes to see and who are not deceived by mere external appearances, the part that the erotic experience may play, both for good and for evil, in the mystery of human life with which Cavafy is concerned.

Second, it will be recalled that, in Socrates’ recantation in the Phaedrus spoken of above, the attempt to do justice to the reality of Eros begins with the recognition that it is a more than human power. For Cavafy Eros also possesses this more than human quality. It is a power that lays hold of one, that enters one. It is also a shaping power, one that in its mastery fashions the beauty of the human body. If Cavafy does not speak of it explicitly as a divine power, this as likely as not is because the language of that kind of theological discourse was alien to him; for certainly he reserves for it the awe and dedication that a votary reserves for the divinity that he worships. And if this dedication in Cavafy’s case leads him to the affirmation of Eros outside the norms of convention and prudence, this is not because Cavafy is anything so naive as an advocate of free love. It is because he is aware that the law of Eros may often – and in certain societies will invariably – be at odds with the law of moral duty or the demand that it must serve the ends of family and procreation. Indeed, in certain circumstances – and Cavafy’s may well have been among them – the most effective way of presenting the irreducible and unpredictable quality of Eros is to present it as an anomaly and even as a physical sickness. But there is no suggestion in Cavafy’s poetry that indulgence in sexual acts unprompted by the presence and inspiration of Eros is anything but distortion and vice. The law of Eros is for Cavafy as austere in its way as it is for Socrates, and it excludes sexual permissiveness just as rigorously as it excludes subordination to ‘the established inadequate norm’.

Moreover – and this is the third thing to be stressed here – however
close some Mephistophelian spirit may push Cavafy in his erotic poems to the abyss of dissolution, he does not make the final assent which would allow him to fall into it irrecoverably. There is never altogether absent in these poems the sense that if the beloved figure is worthy of love it is because he manifests some trace of the harmony and beauty that lie beyond the physical, beyond even the human mind itself, and rise from the eternal synthesis of things. It will be remembered that for Plato in the *Phaedrus* the individuality of the beloved is nothing other than the reflection of an Idea, and that it is participation in the Idea and its divinity which raises the beloved above his individuality. A similar sense of things pervades Cavafy's erotic poetry. The figures that animate it are not simply individual and irreplaceable; they are there because in one way or another, to some degree or another, they incarnate or, better perhaps, enhumanize the Beautiful itself; and it is ultimately to the quest for the vision of the Beautiful beyond its human form and in its divine form that this poetry bears witness.

When the sculptor of Tyana displays his work, his criterion is unambiguous:

> But here's my favourite work,  
> created with the most care and feeling.  
> This one — it was a hot summer day  
> and my mind rose to ideal things —  
> this one came to me in a vision, this young Hermes.  

What was really precious about the young Alexandrian who died young was 'his form, like a vision of Apollo'. The wounded man who lies on the moonlit bed evokes Plato's Charmidis, whose beauty inspired Socrates to his discourse on wisdom as the knowledge of good and evil.

> Try to keep them, poet,  
> those erotic visions of yours

Cavafy counsels, for it is in these visions, in these glimpses of a beauty that is more than physical, more than temporal, that in the end is to be found the meaning even of the encounters with earthly lovers — those encounters which, compared with the 'great love' created in the imagination alone, are 'the less real, the more concrete and tangible'. And what else are the evocations, the calling back into the memory, of
the erotic images of the past, whether personal or historic, but the resurrection of the symbols that provoked intimations of a more-than-human beauty and still have the power to keep the sense of this beauty alive? For to lose this sense of beauty, of which Eros is at once the inspirer and the actualizer, would be to lose touch with all that is capable of sustaining the reality of one's personal existence and even life itself: 'truths that wake to perish never...' 38

In the light of all this, finally, what is to be said of Seferis's judgment, that for Cavafy art 'serves as a kind of narcotic elixir in the general betrayal'? Or what is to be said of the judgment of another Greek critic 39 – again based on the assumption that Cavafy conceals himself behind the protagonists of his poetry – that Cavafy, like the imaginary 6th century poet of one of his poems, 40 regards poetry – the Art of Poetry – as a haven of self-forgetfulness, and as a kind of drug or sedative that relieves, for a while, the pain of aging in body and in beauty? I would suggest that, far from regarding poetry, especially his own poetry, in any such superficial manner, Cavafy's conception of it is much closer to that of someone like Shelley; and that for Cavafy, as for Shelley, poetry has the capacity to strengthen man's moral nature, to teach him self-knowledge and self-respect, and to contribute towards his perfection. 41

Sometime in the 1890's Cavafy wrote a few pages of prose, in English, on the great Christian saint, Simeon Stylites. 42 'This great, this wonderful saint', he calls him, who 'has been, perhaps, the only man who has dared to be really alone'. He has met, he adds, only one poem on Simeon, the poem of Tennyson; but he finds that 'it is in no way worthy of the subject' and that many things in it 'have been handled in a common, almost a vulgar manner'. And he concludes: 'It was a very difficult task – a task reserved, perhaps, for some mighty king of art – to find fitting language for so great a saint, so wonderful a man.' Some twenty years after writing these pages, Cavafy made his own attempt, in poetry, 'to find fitting language for so great a saint'. 43 Perhaps the task was beyond him. At all events, he never included the poem among those he thought worthy of making public during his lifetime; and one can appreciate his reserve.

I recount these details not because they imply that Cavafy was, or was
not, a Christian, but because they reveal that over a period of many years he kept in his mind's eye an image and standard of possible perfection – and this time a perfection not of beauty but of sanctity – which clearly he acknowledged as absolute and unassailable, and which equally clearly aroused in him an aspiration that, had he been able to fulfil it, would have meant for him the consummation of his achievement as a poet. And if, as I believe, Cavafy was well aware of the distress and futility of much of the stricken and debilitated lives he describes often with great poignancy in his poetry, that surely is because he never in the end, and in spite of everything, allowed himself to lose sight of this image and this standard. 'Keep thy mind in hell, and despair not' was the counsel revealed to a twentieth century successor of St Simeon. Cavafy was obedient to the first part of this injunction; and even if, so far as one can tell from his poetry, he did not enter that realm of serenity which so many spiritual travellers record at the end of their journey through some infernal landscape, he certainly did not commit the terrible apostasy of enduring his own particular inferno for its own sake, as an end in itself. Whatever his anguish and uncertainty, he did not despair. His final stance was not one of pessimism, resignation or indifference, and his endurance possessed a quality of heroic non-surrender to the nightmare with which he wrestled for so long. A few months before his death, when he was in Athens, he is reported to have said: 'I still have twenty-five poems to write.' For those who are aware of the enormous labour involved in writing even a single poem of any consequence, such a statement speaks for itself. Far from being the decadent or the amoralist about whom he wrote in so many of his poems, and with whom he too is so often identified, Cavafy did not abdicate or compromise or give in. And if he did not disinter

From marble of a broken sepulchre
Or dark betwixt the polecat and the owl
Or any rich, dark nothing

any of those unfashionable forms our life may take once it is 'out of nature', at least we must acknowledge him as one of those rare human beings who join the ranks of the undefeated because they maintain their covenant with life up to the very end.
Notes

4 Gal. 4: 26.
11 See Edmund Keeley, 'The "New" Poems of Cavafy', in The Mind and Art of C. P. Cavafy, op. cit., p.47, where this quotation is cited.
13 See note 5 above.
15 See K. P. Kavafi, Anekdota Peza Keimena, ed. by M. Peridis (Athens, 1963), pp.36–57. Typical of Cavafy's attitude in this connection are the following extracts, written by Cavafy in English: 'The profit of personal experience is undoubtedly a sound one; but were it strictly observed it would limit tremendously literary production and even philosophical production. If one ought to wait for old age to risk a word about it, if one ought to wait for experience of a violent disease in order to mention it, if one ought to experience every sorrow or perturbed state of mind in order to speak of it — one would find that what is left to write about is very little, and indeed many things might not be written at all obviously as the person who experienced them might not be the person talented to analyse and express them' (pp.36 and 38); 'By the imagination . . . the user can transport himself into the midst of the circumstances and can thus create an experience' (pp.38 and 40); 'It may also very well happen that the guess work or rather the intellectual insight into the feelings of others may result in the delineating of more interesting intellectual facts or conditions, than the mere relation of the personal experience of one individual' (p.48); 'Besides, one lives, one hears and one understands; and the poems one writes, though not true to one's actual life [my italics], are true to other lives. . . . And when one lives, hears and searches intelligently and tries to write wisely his work is bound, one may say, to fit some life' (pp.50 and 52); 'Perhaps Shakespeare had never been jealous in his life, so he ought not to have written "Othello"; perhaps he was never seriously melancholy, so he ought not to have written "Hamlet"; he never murdered, so he ought not to have written "Macbeth"!!' (p.52).

17 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.52.

18 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.22.

19 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.9.

20 Keats, The Fall of Hyperion, I, lines 151 and 153.

21 See Cavafy's own description of his status as a poet, written in French, in K. P. Kavafi, Anekdota Peza Keimena, ed. by M. Peridis, op. cit., pp.82 and 84.


25 Phaedrus 243.

26 Symposium 206.


28 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.67.

29 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.92.

30 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.40.


32 Phaedrus 252.


34 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.37.

35 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.49.

36 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.48.

37 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.143.

38 Wordsworth, 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood'.


40 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.82.


43 Keeley-Sherrard, op. cit., p.150.


46 Two critics should be singled out as exceptions in this respect. Patrick Leigh Fermor speaks of Cavafy's 'severe and didactic message' and of his 'wisdom and sad austerity'. (See Patrick Leigh Fermor, 'Landmarks of Decline', in The Mind and Art of C. P. Cavafy, op. cit., pp.33–39); and Constantine Melakopides, to whose discrimination I gladly acknowledge my debt, argues that Cavafy's poetry 'affirms and often celebrates an ambitious system of positive values' and that important poems in his canon 'unambiguously suggest his conception of the best and the decent life, and of the conditions necessary for achieving it.' (See Constantine Melakopides, 'Cavafy: The Philosophical Poetry', in The Mind and Art of C. P. Cavafy, op. cit., pp.195–223.)

From the School of the Renowned Philosopher

For two years he studied with Ammonios Sakkas, but he was bored by both philosophy and Sakkas.

Then he went into politics. But he gave that up. The Prefect was an idiot, and those around him solemn, officious nitwits: their Greek – poor fools – barbaric.

After that he became vaguely curious about the Church: to be baptized and pass as a Christian. But he soon let that one drop: it would certainly have caused a row with his parents, ostentatious pagans, and – horrible thought – they would have cut off at once their extremely generous allowance.

But he had to do something. He began to haunt the corrupt houses of Alexandria, every secret den of debauchery.

Here he was fortunate: he’d been given an extremely handsome figure, and he enjoyed the divine gift.

His looks would last at least another ten years. And after that? Maybe he’ll go back to Sakkas. Or if the old man has died meanwhile, he’ll find another philosopher or sophist: there’s always someone suitable around.

Or in the end he might possibly return even to politics – commendably remembering the traditions of his family, duty toward the country, and other resonant banalities of that kind.
One of their Gods

When one of them moved through the centre of Selefkia just as it was getting dark – moved like a young man, tall, extremely handsome, the joy of being immortal in his eyes, his hair black and perfumed – the people going by would gaze at him, and one would ask the other if he knew him, if he was a Greek from Syria, or a stranger. But some who looked more carefully would understand and step aside; and as he disappeared under the arcades, among the shadows and the evening lights, going toward the quarter that lives only at night, with orgies and debauchery, with every kind of intoxication and desire, they would wonder which of Them it could be, and for what suspicious pleasure he’d come down into the streets of Selefkia from the August Celestial Mansions.

The City

You said: "I'll go to another country, go to another shore, find another city better than this one. Whatever I try to do is fated to turn out wrong and my heart lies buried as though it were something dead. How long can I let my mind moulder in this place? Wherever I turn, wherever I look, I see the black ruins of my life, here, where I've spent so many years, wasted them, destroyed them totally."

You won't find a new country, won't find another shore. This city will always pursue you. You'll walk the same streets, grow old
in the same neighbourhoods, turn grey in these same houses. You'll always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere: there's no ship for you, there's no road. Now that you've wasted your life here, in this small corner, you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.

Waiting for the Barbarians

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn't anything going on in the senate? Why are the senators sitting there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today. What's the point of senators making laws now? Once the barbarians are here, they'll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early, and why is he sitting enthroned at the city's main gate, in state, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today and the emperor's waiting to receive their leader. He's even got a scroll to give him, loaded with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas? Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts, rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds? Why are they carrying elegant canes beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today and things like that dazzle the barbarians.
Why don't our distinguished orators turn up as usual to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion? (How serious people's faces have become.)

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly, everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say there are no barbarians any longer.

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Translated by Philip Sherrard and Edmund Keeley
Imaginal Yoga in India: A Four-Thousand-Year Tradition

JAMES MAHOOOD

The body of Sanskrit literature called the Śilpaśāstras, which are little known in the West, preserves the ancient traditions of Indian art and sculpture and presupposes the practice of imaginal yoga by artists and artisans. Because traditional Indian artists and craftsmen still follow the rules and conventions set forth in the Śilpaśāstras, they are prototypes of Hindu creativity and imagination upon which later Indian art has been patterned.

The Śilpaśāstras have survived the ravages of time, climate, invasions, insects, worms – even the English – but their dates are disputed. Govinda Krishna Pillai¹ said they took their final shape before the age of Aśoka, whose reign began about 270 B.C.; Phanindra Nath Bose² dated them after the Gupta period, between A.D. sixth century and the eleventh or twelfth century. Bose divided the Śilpa (art) literature into three categories:

1. Vāstū-śāstra, the science of architecture,
2. Śilpa-śāstra, the science of sculpture,
3. Citra-śūtra, the science of painting.

Each category comprises numerous books. Here, we will concentrate on the Śilpaśāstras. At the time of their creation the distinction was apparently not made between art and craft, and the term śilpi was used to designate the artist, architect, sculptor, and craftsman. Their application extended from what we call fine arts and craftsmanship to engineering and such sciences as mathematics and astronomy.

Tradition attributes the origin of the Śilpaśāstras to him who carries the Ganges on his head – that is, the god Śiva, the Great Architect of the Universe. The gods gave all knowledge to chosen individuals of a semi-divine character, who in turn handed it on to posterity through chosen disciples. The names of the actual originators and authors are lost to oblivion; we have only the names of some of the scholars who recorded and passed down the rules and conventions.
In Vedic times (c. 1500–500 B.C.) when the brahmans were exclusively priests, the śilpis occupied a very high position. They had access to and studied the Vedas to help them develop their arts. But the power of the brahmans grew at the expense of the śilpis. Vyāsa, a brahman who according to Pillai lived no later than 1000 B.C., divided the Vedas into four — Rg, Yajur, Sāma, and Atharva — and placed them in the exclusive custody of four of his disciples. After that, the brahmans ignored the Vedas, with the result that the śilpis were deprived of their use. The loss of the Yajur and Atharva were particularly grievous, because it was in these and their commentaries [that] the technical and the theoretical side of the Śilpa-Śāstras were concealed. When the Śilpis were left with the practical side alone of the Śilpa-Śāstras, they became the maintainers of an early tradition, and not the Masters of the Craft. The theory and the ‘Śūtras’ (the secrets) in the hands of the Brahmans were of no avail, for they, having had little occasion to practice, did not know in course of time their real significance. . . . Even without the inner knowledge of the Śilpa-Śāstras, the Śilpis for long have carried on, and the result of their achievement is seen throughout the length and breadth of India and in her former colonies.3

Unlike Egypt, Greece, and Italy, India offers an unbroken cultural tradition of perhaps four-thousand years. As James Cousins noted, ‘in the case of India, the lapse of time puts little or no psychological distance between past and present. The thoughts and feelings that moved the ancients to creative expression are potent in the moderns. Time brings its elaborations and sophistications, in externals, but leaves the foundations of inner life unmoved.’4

For instance, in one of the most philosophically evocative hymns of the Rg Veda, the so-called Creation Hymn, one finds the following statement (RV.10.129.4): ‘Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.’5 The ancient poet-priest (ṛṣi) who wrote the hymn was discussing both a purpose and a source of creativity: it was a function of the ancient poet to generate cosmogonies; in his heart (ṛṣis), he found a law to explain the origin of the world and of life. At the very beginning of this great cultural tradition, one thus finds a hint of yogic practice, which is repeatedly mentioned in connection with the heart and the ākāśa, the ‘cave’ or ‘space’ within the heart.
The Upaniṣads mention the ākāśa in this connection: The Brīhad Āranyaka Upaniṣad (2.5.10) says:

this space is honey for all things, and all things are honey for this space. This shining, immortal Person who is in this space, and, with reference to oneself, this shining, immortal Person who is in the space in the heart — he is just this Soul, this Immortal, this Brahma, this All.6

The Ātman or Soul of the cosmic Person is identified with the human ātman. The outer and the inner are one: the macrocosm is reflected in the microcosm; universal space exists in the space in the human heart; one's inner self is identical with the universal Self; ātman (individual soul) equals Brahma (the eternal ground of the universe, Being, God).

According to the Brīhad-Āranyaka Upaniṣad (2.5.19): ‘This Brahma is without an earlier and without a later, without an inside and without an outside. This Soul is Brahma, the all-perceiving.’7 Brahmā is the Creator god. The Soul is Brahma. We may say that the self is located at the very centre of the universe, and that we are the Creator gods; we possess limitless capabilities: the text empowers us to create as the Creator god himself created. The necessary precondition is that we find our true Self, the Inner Controller, the antar-yāmin.

Brīhad-Āranyaka 3.7.1 spells it out:

Pray do you know . . . that Inner Controller who from within controls this world and the other world and all things . . . . He who knows that thread and the so-called Inner Controller knows Brahma, he knows the worlds, he knows the gods, he knows the Vedas, he knows created things, he knows the Soul, he knows everything.8

The Inner Controller is one’s soul, self, or consciousness (Brīhad 3.7.23): ‘He is your Soul, the Inner Controller, the Immortal.’9

According to the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (3.14.1–4):

Verily, this whole world is Brahma . . . . He who consists of mind . . . whose soul (ātman) is space, containing all works . . . this Soul of mine within the heart is smaller than a grain of rice . . . is greater than the earth . . . Containing all works . . . this is the Soul of mine within the heart, this is Brahma.10

The Creator (Brahma) is the human soul (ātman), which is the space
(ākāśa) in the heart. That space is both the individual human micro-cosm and the macrocosm of the universe. It contains all that can be thought and all that can be created.

Thus, the Chāndogya Upaniṣad (3.18.1) says both that ‘one should reverence the mind as Brahma’ and that ‘one should reverence space [ākāśa] as Brahma’.11 That is, both the mind and the sacred cave of the heart are the sources of man’s creativity. It also says that works that have not yet been created already exist within the ākāśa in the heart. One might add that they ‘already exist’ in the sense that they are archetypes or ideal forms. The artist’s task thus becomes how to find access to this archetypal treasure of the universe stored in the heart. One way involves meditation and yoga.

The Kaṭha Upaniṣad (2.12) presupposes knowledge of yoga for the first time in the Upaniṣads:

Him who is hard to see, entered into the hidden,
Set in the secret place [of the heart], dwelling in the depth,
primeval –
By considering him as God, through the Yoga-study of what pertains to
self,
The wise man leaves joy and sorrow behind.12

In the Parable of the Chariot (1.3.3–9), the Kaṭha Upaniṣad presents the basic yogic ideal for achieving self-realization, which is the same as the creative state:

Know the Self as the lord [ātman] of the chariot and the body as, verily, the chariot, know the intellect [buddhi] as the charioteer and the mind [manas] as, verily, the reins.

The senses [indriyāṇi], they say, are the horses; the objects of sense the paths (they range over); (the self) associated with the body, the senses and the mind – wise men declare – is the enjoyer.

He who has no understanding, whose mind is always unrestrained, his senses are out of control, as wicked horses are for a charioteer.

He, however, who has understanding, whose mind is always restrained, his senses are under control, as good horses are for a charioteer.

He, however, who has no understanding, who has no control over his mind (and is) ever impure, reaches not that goal but comes back to mundane life.
He, however, who has understanding, who has control over his mind and (is) ever pure, reaches that goal from which he is not born again.

He who has the understanding for the driver of the chariot and controls the rein of his mind, he reaches the end of the journey, that supreme abode of the all-pervading.

Beyond the senses are the objects (of the senses) and beyond the objects is the mind; beyond the mind is the understanding and beyond the understanding is the great self.

Beyond the great self is the unmanifest; beyond the unmanifest is the spirit. Beyond the spirit there is nothing. That is the end (of the journey); that is the final goal. 13

On one level, the parable can be read as a statement of austerity, asceticism, and virtue (purity), which indeed it is. But it can also be read as a psychological metaphor. The parable can point to a way out of the endless cycle of birth and rebirth — the Indian nightmare — and it offers a metaphor for the psychological freedom that attends release from mental habits and conditioning.

The final verse of the parable might seem like a statement of existential philosophy; but identification is meant: it is pure yogic experience (I.3.13):

The wise man should restrain speech in mind; the latter he should restrain in the understanding self. The understanding he should restrain in the great self. That he should restrain in the tranquil self. 14

Speech merges with intellect. The yogin or meditator enters immanence, the field of pure potential consciousness. Mind draws into buddhi, into hiranyagarbha, the golden embryo of pure consciousness, free of all distractions and conditioning. Through meditation, one reaches a state of no words, no notion of subjectivity or objectivity, no duality. One is not conscious of existing. Journeying inward, one finds no distinctions; there is only identity, which cannot be achieved, only experienced. That is yogic experience of cosmic mind.

Atman conditioned by buddhi appears as individual mind. Hiranyagarbha is associated with cosmic mind. One finds this also in the twelfth-century European mystic Meister Eckhart, and in Sufism. It is total experience of union (yoga), which can only be described by paradoxical paradigms.
(Before we leave the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, it is important to note that it, as well as other Upaniṣads, contains passages that set forth the dualistic Śaṅkhya philosophy. The Śaṅkhya system has been the chief antithesis of the monistic Vedaṭa philosophy, which is emphasized in this paper as the mainstream of classical Indian philosophy. According to Śaṅkhya philosophy, there are two eternal principles in the universe prakṛti [matter] and puṣṇa [spirit]. The school did not propose any Creator for the two principles, but simply regarded them as self-existent, without beginning or end. Prakṛti is made up of three guṇas or 'strands': sattva [purity], rajas [movement, passion], and tamas [darkness, inertia].)

Ananda Coomaraswamy offered a startling picture of the psychological process of creating from the ākāśa. Through yoga, the 'icon-maker' rids himself of such distractions as emotions, unwanted images, and thoughts. He visualizes the form of his religious subject (e.g., a god or an angel). Then,

the mind 'pro-duces' or 'draws' . . . this form to itself, as though from a great distance. Ultimately, that is, from Heaven, where the types of art exist in formal operation; immediately, from 'the immanent space in the heart' (antar-hṛdaya-ākāśa), the common focus . . . of seer and seen, at which place the only possible experience of reality takes place. The true-knowledge-purity-aspect . . . thus conceived and inwardly known . . . reveals itself against the ideal space (ākāśa) like a reflection . . . or as if seen in a dream (svapnavat). The imager must realize a complete self-identification with it . . . whatever its peculiarities . . . even in the case of opposite sex or when the divinity is provided with terrible supernatural characteristics; the form thus known in an act of non-differentiation, being held in view as long as may be necessary . . . is the model from which he proceeds to execution in stone, pigment, or other material.¹⁵

Coomaraswamy's description of the yoga of the 'icon-maker' reminds one of elements of the definition of imagination in Webster's Third New International Dictionary:

Forming a conscious idea or mental image of something never before wholly perceived in reality by the imaginer . . . the ability or gift of forming such conscious ideas or mental images esp. for the purposes of artistic or intellectual creation . . . an idealized or
poetic creation . . . the power of creating, in the mind or in an outward form as in a literary work, images of things once known but absent, of things never seen or never seen in their entirety, of things actually nonexistent . . . of things perfected or idealized . . . the genuine artist’s gift of perceiving more deeply or essentially.\textsuperscript{16}

It also recalls parts of Webster’s definition of intuition:

Direct knowledge or certainty without reasoning or inferring: immediate cognizance or conviction without rational thought: revelation by insight or innate knowledge: immediate apprehension or cognition . . . divining empathy . . . direct insight into reality as it is in itself and absolutely.\textsuperscript{17}

And the following elements of the word prototype:

An original on which a thing is modelled: pattern . . . one of the ideas or patterns in the divine mind after the likeness of which created things are made.\textsuperscript{18}

And archetype:

Moulded first as a model . . . one of the ideas of which existent things are imitations . . . the idea in the divine intellect that determines the form of a created thing . . . the original model, form, or pattern from which something is made . . . a perfect example of a particular type . . . an abstract or ideal conception of a type.\textsuperscript{19}

Coomaraswamy said the yogic artist’s mental vision comes ‘from Heaven’ and from the space in the heart. This idea parallels Henry Corbin’s mundus imaginalis, which ‘immaterialises the Sensible Forms’ and ‘imaginalises’ the Intellectual Forms to which it gives shape and dimension. The imaginal world creates symbols . . . the imaginative power is a purely spiritual faculty independent of the physical organism. . . . It is therefore perfectly exact here to speak of metaphysical Images. . . . [The imaginal process] means to “reconduct something to its source”, to its archetype, to its true reality.\textsuperscript{20}

Although Coomaraswamy’s example is drawn from the visual arts, one should not assume that the process differs for the arts of literature and music:

Needless to day, imagination may take form either as a vision or as audition; what has been said above with reference to visual art
applies equally to the case of literature, whether scripture or belles lettres. The Vedas, and all their accessory literatures and sciences, for example, are contained in the Word (vāc, dharma, śām), which having been uttered . . . is then heard (śruti) by the Prophets (ṛṣi), that audition depending not on ‘inspiration,’ but upon attention.²¹

Those who practiced the Šilpaśāstra in the early twentieth century were not caste Hindus. Especially in South India, they were so-called untouchables, but during rituals and ceremonies they wore the sacred thread of the ‘twice born’ and performed pujas (sacred rites), which suggests that their ancestors were brahmans. Art and craft were not professions, they were pursuits and traditions that were primarily passed from father to son through the ages.

Pillai wrote,

Where are the Šilpis or their descendants now? They are practically everywhere in India. They are submerged in the vast multitude of working men. . . . The Šilpis are mere artisans now; but there was a time when they were artists, artisans and scientists combined. . . . From time immemorial, they gave us the spirit of India.²²

Bose contrasted what he said twentieth-century art lovers consider beautiful with what Hindus consider beautiful: The former would ask, “What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure?”²³ According to Bose, the Indian view is that images are beautiful if, first of all, the artist has followed the rules in the śāstras. For example, the following are among the criteria for a beautiful idol of a god:

Its head should be like an umbrella, the line of the eyebrow and forehead should be beautiful, the neck should be like a conch, the body should be in the lion posture, the arms should be like the trunk of an elephant, the belly should be beautiful, the thighs should be like the plantain tree, the shanks should be becoming and the feet should be beautiful. . . . The image should be well-modelled.²⁴

Such description, of course, would have been insufficient when the sculptor confronted the stone. But the śāstras also provided specific measurements.
In the remote past, it was difficult to make accurate measurements because of the elasticity and non-standardization of measuring instruments. Different ropes, for example, expanded and contracted differently at different temperatures and humidities. The śilpis introduced a proportionate system of measurements to overcome the difficulties. Called the tāla system, it did not depend on any standard measurement, but was based on the object as a whole. The tāla system was used in sculpture and sometimes in architecture. In sculpture, an image was conceived to be of so many tālas or equal divisions. There may be any number of tālas, but generally, for the human figure, there are eight, nine, or ten tālas. Each tāla is divided into twelve parts. Thus, a ten-tāla figure would have 120 parts from head to toe. The distance between the different parts of the body were then given in the number of these parts. For the following examples, it is helpful to know that ‘an aṅgula is one-fourth of a muṣṭi (the closed fist of a hand)’ and ‘a tāla is twelve aṅgulas.’

A ten-tāla image of a female included the following relationships:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Number of Parts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head, from crown to the hair on the forehead</td>
<td>4 parts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forehead up to the eye-line</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose up to the tip</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nose tip to the chin</td>
<td>3½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Width of each breast</td>
<td>9½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height of breast</td>
<td>4½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance between breasts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Width of the mid-thigh</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Et c.]

The directions for the image of a god included the following:

The image should be divided into two parts, which again should be divided into two more parts. The last again should be divided into two parts and the last again into three parts. That should consist of eight aṅgulas, the half of which should be the measurement of the head. Some maintain that the end of hair is its one-fourth part.

In the excellent nine tāla, the head should be four aṅgulas, the face (mukha) twelve and the neck four aṅgulas.

The length from the neck to the breast should be twelve aṅgulas, there should be the same length from the breast to the navel, as well as from navel to the end. [Et c.]
Knowing beforehand the relative proportions between the different parts, the artist took any height, divided it into tālas and parts, and shaped the figure, limb by limb. Thus, they were able to proportion gigantic figures of saints and demons in rock, magnificent rock-cut temples, and tiny charms in ivory and precious stones—all with full details.

Why were these measurements important? Why were they recorded, passed down from generation to generation, and accepted by artists and artisans? While discussing the purpose of Indian art, Bose supplied a partial answer: Indian sculptors did not create statues for their own enjoyment, but to meet the requirements of worshippers. ‘Art for art’s sake,’ did not play a role in the Indian creative process. The raison d’être for art was religion. The religious zeal of the people governed the activities of artists. Artists and sculptors were moved by religious enthusiasm, and they created images with a specific function: to help the worshippers in their worship. The images should attract the respect and devotion of the devotees. Artists wanted the images of gods to represent their divine and superhuman power; such gods as Brahmā and Viṣṇu were given superhuman characteristics, such as four or more arms. According to the Śilpa canons, a beautiful image was one that expressed and evoked a contemplative mood. That is the highest criterion of the Śilpaśāstras, and it is ‘the distinguishing characteristic of Indian art and sculpture.’

Bose quoted the Śilpaśāstras:

The characteristic of an image is its power of helping forward contemplation and Yoga. The human maker of images should, therefore, be meditative. Besides meditation there is no other way of knowing the character of an image—even direct observation (is of no use).

Just because artists and artisans had specific measurements to follow, they did not therefore escape the inner spiritual disciplines of meditation and yoga:

Let the imager establish images in temples by meditation on the deities who are the objects of his devotion. For the successful achievement of this yoga (union) the lineaments of the image are described in books to be dwelt upon in detail. In no other way, not even by direct and immediate vision of an actual object, is it possible to be so absorbed in contemplation, as this in the making of images.
The *yoga* or union mentioned is the union between the artist's concentration and the object of concentration. Pillai quoted Coomaraswamy: 'The purpose of the Yoga is the mental concentration carried so far as the overlooking of all distinction between the subject and the object of concentration; a means of achieving harmony or unity of consciousness.' In order to prepare for this concentration, the artist fasts, purifies himself, and prays. Pillai quoted a typical prayer: 'O thou, Lord of all Gods, teach me in dreams to carry out all the work I have in my mind.'

We should note the difference between the *śīḷpi* model and the model of Western artists. First, through mental absorption and perception — that is, through yoga — *śīḷpis* create their models, then externalize what they have seen in their imaginings, visions, or dreams. Their actual execution is constrained by the proportions and traditions recorded in the *Śīḷpaśāstras*, *Purāṇas*, and *Āgamas*. Western artists, on the other hand, often take their inspiration directly from external models, although, of course, they add or subtract to suit their own sensibilities and predilections.

Pillai maintained that the ideals of at least one of the learned men who recorded the conventions of Hindu sculpture, Sukra Acharya or Usanus Sukra, enunciated 'some four thousand years ago, have been cherished and maintained by the *śīḷpis* through ages, whether they were Vaishṇavites [worshippers of Viṣṇu], Śaivites [worshippers of Śiva] or Buddhists.' Reportedly, he is quoted even today by Hindu *śīḷpis*. His works are known as Sukra Nithi. He was a Dravidian, a brahman, a sage, and an ascetic, with a weakness for strong drink. Sukra is mentioned in the *Purāṇas*. In his Nithi, Sukra recorded the Hindu ideal of art and sculpture. He wrote that art for the Hindu śīḷpi is the self-expression of the artist, in conformity with certain rules and traditions. It is not as one sees in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the 'imitation of nature'; it is not the 'imitation' of something external to the artist. The materialistic understanding of imagination — that the contents of imagination are by definition unreal — incorrectly assumes, therefore, that traditional Indian artists do not depict the real because they do not imitate external models. They would reply, with Henry Corbin, that the reality they depict is more real than that conveyed by Western artists who imitate nature by drawing only from external nature — that is, from sense perceptions. The Indian view is that sense perceptions
reveal only subjective reality; but that, to use Henry Corbin's terms, the imaginal faculty can reveal objective Reality. Through the visions produced by imaginal yoga, traditional Indian artists seek to portray Real Nature, not the appearance or illusion (māyā) of nature portrayed by profane artists.

The rediscovery of Imagination, however, has come slowly. Many modern scholars view the work of the artist merely as self-expression, rather than as Self-expression, and question whether Indian self-expression was possible in the presence of so many rules. Bose, for example, thought that if the artist must conform to traditional measurements and proportions, imagination would be stifled:

These canonical rules of Śilpa were compiled in the age which witnessed the decline of Indian art. After the Sarnatha School, there was an appreciable fall in the high standard of Indian art. It was, no doubt, due to the absence of any talented artist in the succeeding ages. As the real gifted artists became few in numbers, some rules became necessary for guiding the common artists. . . . So, we find the founders of Śilpa schools enforcing these rules on the artists. They argued that as they could not inspire the artists with genuine artistic tendency, it was better to insist on form. 33

Beauty was sacrificed to form and outward convention. Bose allowed that some images were better than their predecessors, but only when 'the artists had little regard for the conventional rules of Śilpaśāstra . . . [and] gave full play to their chisel and their own idea.' 34 Although Pillai expressed a different opinion, he did not appear to grasp the metaphysical Reality of yogic images. He said that the wise men who recorded the old measurements left some latitude to impress the individuality of the artist on the image of his creation. The sameness that is seen in Hindu sculpture is due to the strict adherence to these rules, incidentally the unique feature of their design also lies hidden in this. . . . The sculpture of the Hindu is the full embodiment of his culture; it represents his devotion, his love of nature, his flights of imagination, his love, romance, dance and all put in certain mathematical proportions. He seldom created individual or personal portraits, even on occasions when he did, he attributed to them the characteristics that his ideal demanded. . . . He seldom imitated nature, but he gave nature what was its due. 35
Obviously, it is not the function of this paper to judge traditional Indian art and sculpture, and needless to say no list of measurements can ever be translated into great art in the absence of talent and imagination. Nor would using certain measurements necessarily destroy imaginative spontaneity any more than does the use of rhyme and metre in poetry. Throughout the world, art students are taught ideal proportions and measurements, but do not confuse such guidelines with authentic inspiration.

As James Cousins observed, no artist ever has absolute freedom in which to create. He is connected to and limited by such external concerns as method, materials, environment, climate, politics. Some limitations are passed on from artist to artist and from age to age; others are specific to a given time, group, or place. But behind external circumstances, and working through them, is the fundamental conception as to the nature of the universe and the relation of humanity to that universe which produces the general attitude to life and art, whether artist and public conform to the general pattern or rebel against it.

If one is to judge Indian art, one must first ask what was the Hindu conception of the universe and how did that conception relate humanity to that universe? It is in relation to those conceptions that we must examine the Śilpaśāstras. We must enter their conception in order to view the relationship or lack of relationship between the Śilpaśāstras and creativity. To do less is to judge another culture merely on the basis of one's own.

Those questions remind one of Mircea Eliade's book The Sacred and the Profane, for we are confronting the gulf between India's sacred cultures and the West's profane cultures. It is difficult for Westerners to imagine the extent of the gulf between them. As Eliade said, the sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history. . . . In the last analysis, the sacred and profane modes of being depend upon the different positions that man has conquered in the cosmos.

In this connection, Coomaraswamy's The Transformation of Nature in Art is again useful, for his discussion moves from a description of the imaginal yoga of icon makers to criteria for judging India's images.
Practicing the psychological method of yoga, the traditional way for the theistic Hindu to create, the artist focuses attention on such descriptions of his subject as those contained in the Śilpaśāstras, even if it is a god, until he achieves 'identity of consciousness with the object considered.' These descriptions are called dhyāna mantras (trance formulae) or sādhana (means). They 'provide the germ from which the form of the deity is to be visualized.' Coomaraswamy quotes an example:

I worship our gentle lady Bhuvanēśvari, like the risen sun, lovely, victorious, destroying defects in prayer, with a shining crown on her head, three-eyed and with swinging earrings adorned with diverse gems, as a lotus-lady, abounding in treasure, making the gestures of charity and giving assurance. Such is the dhyānam of Bhuvanēśvari [a form of Devi, or goddess].

To the image thus conceived, imagined flowers and other offerings are made. This is interior or subtle (sūkṣma) worship, as opposed to external or gross (sthūla) worship: In India, artists create from conceptual or interior models, rather than from external, material models, as do we in the West; in India, there is little concern for the personal and individual in art, as there is in the West.

Coomaraswamy said there is an even more subtle level called para-rūpa (transform) 'in which the worship is paid directly to the deity as he is in himself. . . . But such gnosis is in fact only possible, and therefore only permissible, to the perfected Yogan and veritable jivan-mukta' (one who has attained spiritual freedom from all name and aspect, but who is still manifest in human form).

Whether the worship is gross or subtle, the objective is 'identification of the worshipper's consciousness with the form under which the deity is conceived: . . . "only as the angel can one worship the angel . . . to worship the Angel become the Angel."' Thus, the dhyānam is realized in full sāmādhi, which is the consummation of all yoga, whether the practitioner is an artist or not. Perhaps the most famous mythological image of India in the West, Śiva's cosmic dance, provides an example. Coomaraswamy quoted Tirumular:

The dancing foot, the sound of the tinkling bells,
The songs that are sung, and the various steps,
The forms assumed by our Master as He dances,
Discover these in your own heart, so shall your bonds be broken.
Coomaraswamy distinguished between the creativity that we have just examined, and the creation of icons for worship, say, in a temple or home. This is a 'technical procedure [that] must be undertaken by a professional craftsman, who may be variously designated śilpin, "craftsman," yogin, "yogi," sādhaka, "adept," or simply rūpa-kāra or pratimākāra, "imager."' But the technical production of images is no less tied to the method of yoga: The śilpin, too, undertakes the entire process of worship, self-purification, mental visualization, and identification of consciousness with the form evoked, and only then translates the form into stone or metal. The craftsman follows mental constructions, not physical models. 'The trance formulae become the prescriptions by which the craftsman works'; these formulae are included in the Śilpaśāstras, the technical literature of craftsmanship.

Quoting the encyclopaedist Śukrācārya, Coomaraswamy summed it up this way:

One should set up in temples the images of angels who are the objects of his devotion, by mental vision of their attributes; it is for the full achievement of this yoga-vision that the proper lineaments of images are prescribed; therefore the mortal imager should resort to trance-vision, for thus and no otherwise, and surely not by direct perception, is the end to be attained.

Why should an artist study the prescriptions of the Śilpaśāstras and endure the long years of yoga travail? The reasons are in part spiritual and religious: "Even the misshapen image of an angel is to be preferred to that of a man, however attractive the latter may be," because images of angels exist for spiritual reasons, unlike images of people. But also the reasons are 'scientific,' because the Indian view is that Reality is reached by means of imaginal yoga and that their 'art' is 'scientific,' that is, it is an accurate transcription of metaphysical Reality.

Like Plato, Vasubandhu declared that when the mind dwells on form alone (nāma: 'name,' 'idea'), then the perception of appearance disappears and 'only the reference remains; one reaches then the world-without-aspectual-perception, and with further practice attains to liberation from all hindrances, becoming adept.' One thus achieves identity of consciousness with the archetypal realm. Coomaraswamy observed that Vasubandhu has, in effect, distinguished ideal and
realistic art: ‘the one a means to the attainment of fuller consciousness, the other merely a means to pleasure. So, too, might the anatomical limitations of Giotto be defended as against the human charm of Raphael.’

All traditional Indian images, whether purely anthropomorphic or purely geometrical, such as the yantra whose interlocking triangles represent the integration of male and female and other dualities, are ‘equally ideal, symbolic forms’; they are Real. They have purpose and utility and do not exist, as do images in the West, merely as works of art with aesthetic surfaces and sensations; they are hypostases of God, Being, the eternal ground of the universe.

What we have, then, in India, is a view of art that is really religious scholasticism. It does not admit the validity of individual taste, nor the idea of art for art’s sake. It does not copy external nature. Images derive from conventional types classified by priests and can only be judged for ‘showing at different times a greater or less degree of consciousness, a greater or less energy; the criteria are degrees of vitality, unity, grace, and the like, never of illusion.’ The artistic tradition in the West is to break tradition; the artistic tradition in India is not to break it.

To sum up, the practitioner of imaginal yoga clears his mind of distractions and conditioning; visualizes the religious form (archetype), which arises from ‘Heaven’ and the ākāśa in the heart; completely identifies his consciousness with the visualized form; then projects the image into the world as art.

The identification of archetypal image with work of art resonates throughout Indian history. The ancient Vedic priests did not recreate the Creation at the fire sacrifice; rather, they believed that they made the Creation actually occur and that they were, in turn, made by that Creation. So, too, the Hindu maker of Śiva icons, for example, actually creates Śiva; he does not recreate the god. The artist/priest invokes the actual deity into the icon; if the statue is not perfect – does not follow the traditional rules and conventions set forth in the Śilpaśāstras – then it cannot be the perfect vessel that becomes the perfect god. The artist externalizes his mental image, which is Real. To the degree that the outer art-form matches the inner image, the artist has ‘succeeded.’

The traditional Indian artist projects his internal identification with Being, with the archetypal realm, into the world; art thus embodies
the classical non-dualistic mainstream of Hindu philosophy and religion. This essential tradition of Indian imaginal yoga has remained remarkably consistent for four thousand years. Perhaps it attracted William Butler Yeats, who collaborated with Shri Purohit Swami on a translation of the Upaniṣads published in 1937. Their version contains the following statement:

There is as much in that little space [ākāśa] within the heart, as there is in the whole world outside. Heaven, earth, fire, wind, sun, moon, lightning, stars; whatever is and whatever is not, everything is there.  

Notes

3 Pillai, p.289.
7 Hume, p.105.
8 Hume, p.114.
9 Hume, p.117.
10 Hume, pp.209-10.
11 Hume, p.213.
12 Hume, p.348; emphasis added.
14 Radhakrishnan, pp.627-28.
16 Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, s.v. ‘imagination.’
17 Webster’s Third, s.v. ‘intuition.’
18 Webster’s Third, s.v. ‘prototype.’
19 Webster’s Third, s.v. ‘archetype.’
21 Coomaraswamy, p.175.
22 Pillai, pp.289-90.
23 Bose, p.19; emphasis added.
24 Bose, p.25.
The nine [triangles] signify the primitive revelation of the Absolute as it differentiates into graduated polarities, the creative activity of the cosmic male and female energies on successive stages of evolution. . . . The Absolute is to be visualized by the concentrating devotee as a vanishing point or dot, 'the drop' (bindu), amidst the interplay of all the triangles. This bindu is the power-point, the invisible, elusive center from which the entire diagram expands. And now, whereas four of the triangles link with their . . . counterparts, the fifth, or innermost, remains over, to unite with the invisible point. (Heinrich Zimmer, Indian Art, p.147)
When we recall that the sixth Islamic century, the time of Suhrawardî and Ibn Arabī, was also the twelfth Christian century, there comes to mind the no less glorious epoch of St Bernard, the Knights Templar, the Platonic School of Chartres, Gothic architecture, and the polyphonic music of the Notre Dame School. But before we can speak of this era, in which the doctrine of cosmic harmony was cast in stone as well as in words, we must cast a backward glance to two ancestral figures: the semi-mythical Dionysius the Areopagite, and his Irish interpreter John Scotus Eriugena.

Dionysius was identified in the early Middle Ages both with the companion of St Paul and with St Denis, patron saint of France. An inward truth lies in such erroneous ideas, just as in the latter attribution of the Corpus Hermeticum to ancient Egypt. Spiritual continuities and connections certainly exist that cannot be proven on earthly terms: the point of the present survey is to demonstrate the eternal vitality of one such current. If some people can only believe in these connections by making them identities or links of cause and effect, nothing is really lost or mistaken. To prove them wrong serves for nothing unless accompanied by an insight into the matter at another level. The triple identity of Dionysius, for example, stands for the coming together of Christianity and Greek philosophy, and for their rational and practical progeny to which France has so notably contributed.

The particular achievement of the 5th-century author of the Corpus Areopagiticum was to reconcile the Neoplatonic theology with the demands of monotheism: it was he who first enumerated the Nine Orders of Angels (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Principalities, Archangels, Angels) as stages of emanation from
the One. The image of these beings as heavenly musicians would become a favourite subject of Western art and poetry. Dionysius actually calls them ‘choirs’ and describes them as singing antiphonally: their song is the transmission of knowledge from one hierarchical level to another, knowledge that Man, too, can attain through them. The Prophet Ezekiel, in his vision of the Seraphim, ‘also learned that divine and most glorious song of praise; for the Angel who fashioned the vision gave, as far as possible, his own holy knowledge to the prophet.’ Each Order, moreover, is divided into first, middle, and last powers, relating to each other ‘according to the same law of the regular principle of order, in divine harmony and proportion.’ Just as in the division of the World-Soul in Plato’s Timaeus, proportion and harmony here fulfil the dual function of connecting yet dividing, without which the chain of emanation could not proceed.

The Dionysian corpus fell ‘as a meteor from another world’ on the Irish scholars who emigrated to the Continent of Europe in the 9th century. John Scotus Eriugena (c.825–877) proved equal to the task of translating it with its Greek commentaries and giving the Latin world a complete Christianized Neoplatonism. In his great work on the universe, Periphyseon, he defines music as ‘the discipline which by the light of reason perceives the harmony of all things which, on account of natural proportions, are in knowable motion.’ This of course refers not to the Angelic Hierarchy (whose motion is unknowable) but to the cosmos, of which, as he says in the same work, the part from the Moon to the Fixed Stars ‘is the most serene and rests in eternal silence save for the harmonious symphonies of the planets, and surpasses every mortal and earthly sense by the high pitch of its tones and semitones.’ When he came to write a commentary on Martianus Capella, Eriugena had to be more specific about these tones and semitones. In so doing he showed the independence of his thought by rejecting the usual Classical assignation of a fixed pitch to each planetary sphere, recognizing instead that the Music of the Spheres must consist of intervals and proportions which change as the planets themselves move. He therefore gives several different tunings for the planetary music, varying with the relative positions of the planets. Such a flexible interpretation was not to be seen again until Anselmi, over 500 years later.

But Eriugena was far more adept in metaphysics than in the Quadrivium. Above all, music seemed to him the clearest perceptible
symbol of the reconciliation of contrary qualities (including Good and Evil) out of which the Universe is compounded. In his philosophy, as in so many others', music and harmony are merely used as metaphors. Yet is this 'merely' justified? To the student of musicology, yes, for he is concerned first with musica instrumentalis, the audible music, and such metaphors appear to him a borrowing, more or less apt, from his own art. But to the philosopher the situation must appear reversed: the harmony which is composed and heard is merely a metaphor for the harmony that holds the Universe together.

It is the perception of this harmony, and the effort to incarnate it in visible form, that marks the spiritual movement in the 12th century of which Chartres is the geographical centre. ‘We are dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants’, is how Bernard of Chartres (d. btw.1124–30) described the relation of his Platonic School to the masters of Antiquity; and even the giants were known largely through the mediation of others, at best human in stature; the late Latin Neoplatonists. A fragment of the Timaeus, the Asclepius, the works of Calcidius, Macrobius, Apuleius, Martianus, Boethius, and a few others sufficed, with the fertilizing influence of Eriugena, to inspire in the masters of Chartres a metaphysical system, a cosmology, and a religious piety whose tangible results remain as an unequalled exemplar of Christian civilization. The new Pythagoreanism which, with this school, entered the lingua franca of every discipline might perhaps have become the major philosophical concern of the later Middle Ages, had not Aristotle’s works cast a stronger spell after the close of the miraculous 12th century.

The Chartrians were no dry Scholastics. True to the mythical imagination of their master Plato, they also cast their philosophical ideas, for the first time since Martianus Capella, in the form of imaginative literature. The Cosmographia of Bernard Sylvestris (mid-12th century) ‘crystallizes in poetic language and imagery complex philosophical and theological concepts which might have aroused serious criticism . . . if presented in prose argumentation.’ Concepts such as universal harmony were not of course controversial as yet, but the description might be applied, time and again, to later literary works in which such ideas lived on long after they had become philosophically unacceptable. The first part of the Cosmographia describes the formation of Nature, at her own request, by a Noys (Gk. nous)
who represents, in Christian terms, the Logos or second Person of the Trinity.

Silva [sc. Gk. hyle], intractable, a formless chaos, a hostile coalescence, the motley appearance of being, a mass discordant with itself, longs in her turbulence for a tempering power; in her rankness for cultivation. Yearning to emerge from her ancient confusion, she demands the shaping influence of number and the bonds of harmony.  

The book goes on to describe picturesquely the creation and ensouling of matter, and, in the second part, the making of the visible cosmos and of Man. The active agent in all of this, based on the World-Soul of the Timaeus, is, for the Chartrians, a personification of natural forces subordinate, dependent, and modelled on the image of an Idea of God. The numbers of which it is constituted are a living mathematical form-principle, which harmony is the one bond between body and soul.

The same harmonizing function appears on another level altogether in an anonymous commentary on Martianus from William of Conches' circle (mid-12th century). This passage concerns the transmutation of semen into the human embryo, another miraculous work of organization.

Hymenaeus, therefore, because he is present before childbearing, is aptly called the god of weddings, for the lawful sexual union of man and woman always look forward to this goal, inasmuch as it is desired for the procreation of children. . . . His father is aptly called Bacchus, for with Ceres and Bacchus (i.e. food and wine) Venus grows hot: the motion Hymenaeus most delights in is aroused. So too Camena, that is voluptuousness or delectation, is his mother, or Cypris, that is commingling, for the human body is produced from the particles of seed proportionately commingled, and the four elements are adjusted proportionately, as in the ordering of the world – for the human body is a microcosm.

As the translator, Peter Dronke, comments, 'The theophanies of this Spirit are not exclusively “spiritual”: they can be experienced not only through the theological virtue charity, but by couples through
their sexual love and procreation – as well as by the scientist contemplating the cosmic harmonies.'

These cosmic harmonies are described as actually heard in one of the last Chartrian works, Alan of Lille’s epic poem *Anticlaudianus*. His theme, similar to Bernard’s, is the creation by Nature of a perfect Man, involving the old themes of the ascent and descent of the soul through the spheres and the harmonizing of the elements of creation. The maiden Phronesis (Prudence), riding in a chariot adorned by the Seven Liberal Arts and drawn by the Five Senses, passes the planetary spheres one by one and hears the music of each as she goes by. As she approaches the Sun, for instance,

the maiden’s ear becomes disenchanted with the music of the Moon since a sweet and finer sound attracts her, feasting her ears and preventing her from remembering the previous sound. This sound is produced by a Siren who is closely associated with the Sun’s movements and who by her sweet singing intimates the harp [of the various celestial strings or voices]. Every voice admires her and bends in admiration before her and the entire music of the harp sighs longingly in her direction.12

In both Bernard and Alan we seem to be watching the reincarnation of the spirit of Martianus Capella, for these medieval fantasists, more or less Christian as they may be, were equally children of a decadent Hermetic Platonism: that is to say a Platonism that knows none of the rigour of the Socratic dialogues, nor cares for the subtleties of Plotinus, but is all moralizing allegory and picturesque metaphysics. Yet we would not contest the beauty and sincerity of their visions. The culmination of this fashion for cosmic journeys, which goes back ultimately to those of Er and Scipio, is of course Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, in which music is duly acknowledged but not largely stressed.

The theoretical and literary treatment of cosmic music would hold little real interest if it were not fertilized from time to time by real experiences of its subject matter. One mode of such experience, already alluded to by Dionysius, is that of supernal knowledge revealed in a form whose best description seems to be song. This is the subject of an extraordinary passage in the Jewish Zohar, compiled in Spain in
the 13th century, concerning the reciprocity of such knowledge between men and angels:

It is also known and believed that those angels that sing by night are the leaders of all the other singers; and when on earth we living terrestrial creatures raise up our hearts in song, then those supernal beings gain an accession of knowledge, wisdom and understanding, so that they are enabled to perceive matters which even they had never before comprehended. Says Rabbi Nehemiah: ‘Blessed is he who is worthy to perceive such singing, for, as we know and have been taught, he who is deemed worthy to comprehend this song becomes adept in doctrine and obtains wit to discuss what has been and what will be.’

The hearing of angelic songs may also remain a purely musical or emotional experience. The first writer to mention this in a musical treatise, Aurelian of Réôme (mid-9th century), gives vivid circumstantial descriptions of two people who heard angels sing actual plainsong melodies and were able as a result to correct the versions currently sung in church. From the 12th century onward examples could be multiplied indefinitely, but are usually of the incommunicable variety. Thus St Hildegard of Bingen (mid-12th century) saw the Nine Orders of Angels drawn up in patterns, singing indescribable hymns of praise. In Dante, as in the visions of Henry Suso (mid-14th century), the Heavenly Host dance as well as sing. The heavenly liturgy, in which Christ and Mary are often perceived as celebrants, is recognized as the archetype upon which the earthly liturgy is modelled. In just the same way, the Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals were envisioned as images of the Heavenly Jerusalem, or, on the additional ‘Pythagorean’ level manifest at Chartres and its successors, as the embodiment of the mathematical intelligence according to which even heavenly cities must be formed.

The acceptance of the higher forms of music by theorists suffered little setback when Aristotelian philosophy displaced the earlier medieval Platonism. One reason was that certain Neoplatonic treatises acquired from the Arabs still passed as works of Aristotle himself. The Dominican Robert Kilwardby (d. 1279), who knew both traditions, defines music in scholastic fashion but acknowledges its powers for perfective gnosis:
Its subject is a harmonic number, or things joined by harmonic proportion. Its end: the knowledge of such things and of such a number—indeed, the perfection of the speculative part of the soul through cognition of this sort.\(^\text{16}\)

The same gnostic view is staunchly upheld by the greatest theorist of the Ars Antiqua period, Jacques de Liège (c. 1260—after 1330), who could say of the inhabitants of Heaven that they learn from the Book of Life all things that may be known, and that ‘the best musicians are those who intuitively observe that eternal book. For in it there lies open and shines forth every proportion, every concord, every consonance, every melody.’\(^\text{17}\) He prefaces his enormous work on musical theory with the longest, most complete, and probably the most intelligent disquisition yet written on the higher forms of music. Unfortunately it has not been translated from the Latin.

From the point of view of our doctrines, the entire Medieval period does show a certain unanimity. Over questions such as whether the planetary spheres actually make a sound there is debate and scepticism (Roger Bacon and Vincent of Beauvais being two eminent dissenters), but these, after all, are questions which can only arise from a state of misunderstanding. This particular debate is meaningless unless multiple levels of meaning are accepted for the terms ‘spheres’ and ‘sounds’. If one can only imagine crystalline but physical spheres, and sounds caused by the vibrations of air, the answer is that they do not. If on the other hand the spheres are states of the soul and the sounds intimations of knowledge, then it is true that, even on the lowest level, the Saturnian condition of psychic melancholy can endow the subject with the wisdom of him ‘whose voice surpasses the voices of his companions in matured harmony’ (Alan of Lille), an experience like that of a tragic but noble music that leaves him ‘a sadder but a wiser man’.

A definite change comes over musical esotericism with the Renaissance: the focus of interest is no longer only on how things are, but also on what can be done with them. Marsilio Ficino (1433—99) is the pivotal figure here, as in so much else. His interest in music was a practical one, but his practice not so much that of a musician as of a white magician.\(^\text{18}\) After studying the Asclepius and Iamblichus’ *De Mysteriis*, Ficino became fascinated by the idea of impregnating talis-
mans with the energies of the various planets and using them to imbue oneself with these qualities. Among the means of drawing down influences from the heavens, whether for the purpose of consecrating talismans or for directly ameliorating the spirits of the subject, was the singing of songs or hymns chosen to accord with the planet in question. Ficino himself used to sing the Hymns of Orpheus in such ceremonies, accompanying himself on the lira. He was at pains to emphasize that this innocuous planetary ‘imitation’ had nothing at all to do with the adoration of demons, of which ignorant people would willingly have accused him, and thanks to the patronage of the Medici he escaped the persecution that afflicted many a humbler practitioner of sympathetic magic.

Ficino’s actual music is not preserved. As he says, ‘it would be an extremely difficult task to decide which tones go with which stars,’ and in fact he seems not to have done so very thoroughly, to judge by the speculative tone in which he then suggests that one should study the astrological qualities, observe the music of persons and places known to be under definite stars, and follow the changing planetary transits with an experimental attention to how people speak, sing, move, dance, and otherwise behave under them. In other fields he is more than willing to share his knowledge of planetary rulerships. But music is only one of ‘seven steps through which harmony is drawn from the higher to the lower, with voices holding the middle step, dedicated to Apollo.’ The other steps are: minerals, corresponding to the Moon; vegetable and animal extracts – Mercury; imaginative forms and emotions – Mars; rational discourse and thought – Jupiter; higher intelligence, bordering on the divine – Saturn. In order to perform the most efficacious ceremony, it seems that one should operate on as many steps as possible, choosing in each realm the items ruled specifically by the desired planet. If one needs the influences of Jupiter, for example, one should sing jovial songs but also use amulets made from his metal (tin), eat foods such as sweet almonds and chicken, dress in blue, and contemplate images of the Father of the Gods.

For this sort of magic one needs to know the appropriate correspondences, and it is their tabulation that now becomes a major concern of natural philosophers and speculative musicians alike. If the
medieval world-view, to put it simply, was like a single Great Chain of Being rising from the mineral earth up through the four elements and eight or so spheres, thence through the ninefold hierarchy of Angels to conclude with the Holy Trinity, the Renaissance doctrine of correspondences would have to be pictured as a hierarchy of discrete horizontal planes – the steps or stages of angelic, planetary, animal, and other beings – all traversed by a number of different vertical chains. The motto for this image would be the Hermetic axiom of similarity between what is above and what is below.

The early Renaissance music theorists developed this world-view into a complete musical cosmology. Giorgio Anselmi of Parma (before 1386 – between 1440–3), an astrologer and amateur theorist, had followed Dante in assigning to each sphere the influence not of a pagan Muse but of an Order of Dionysius' Celestial Hierarchy. Ramis de Pareja (1440–91?) went further in his Musica Practica (1482), aligning Muses, planets, musical pitches, and the emotional affects of the eight modes. This important step united the three Boethian divisions of music by specifying, as Ficino had never done, the type of practical music that could be expected to bring about a certain state of the soul corresponding to a certain planetary influence. And inasmuch as the Muses were now christianized as Angels, the system went higher still, implying the participation of the hypercosmic powers to whom the planets themselves were responsible. It only remained for the levels of possible correspondences to be extended up to God himself, and this was duly done. Pico della Mirandola had published in Heptaplus (1491) a system of 27 members divided into three corresponding worlds: Nine Orders of Angels, nine celestial spheres, and nine orders of earthly existence (animals, four elements, etc.). Francesco Giorgi, in Harmonia Mundi (1525), took up Pico's arguments and, supported by an enormous weight of scriptural and Rabbinic precedent, extended the system to include nine of the Sephiroth (the hypostases of the Kabbalah) and, as the ultimate generators of each chain, nine Hebrew Names of God. The theme of Giorgi's vast work takes us back in spirit to the Chartrians: it is the harmony of all creation, elemental, celestial, and angelic, with the archetypes directly emanating from the Divine Mind and ultimately with what one might call the aspects of God's own Being; and all this solely in order to be subsumed in the inviolable
Unity which the mystic may perceive through the shadows of multiplicity.

A philosophy based on correspondences may give rise to two contrasting attitudes (though both may alternate in the same person), reflecting the division of the mystical path into the ways of affirmation and negation. On the one hand it is possible to use the system practically in order to draw down higher influences into oneself, to affect or sanctify the circumstances of earthly life. This involves 'making one's life agree with the heavens,' as the title of Ficino's book has it. On the other hand, the system can lead to a contemplative attitude in which the circumstances, no matter what they are, can start one on the ladder of reflections which terminate with the aspect of God from which they ultimately depend.

The awesome powers which Classical authors ascribed to music, notably its capacity to move stones, plants, animals and the souls of men, had never been forgotten, thanks to the anecdotes collected by the Latin encyclopedists. The ambition of the Renaissance was to regain these powers. I leave aside the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century debates on what musical style best moves the passions, because these can easily be studied in musicological works and in any case do not usually have anything esoteric about them. The powers in question go further than transient emotions: they are occult and magical ones that are intended to change the world. An illustration of how music served such ambitions can be seen in France between about 1570 and 1670. At the beginning of this period was founded Baif's Academy of Poetry and Music, outwardly a humanist institution with the intention of regaining the ancient effects through a new union of the arts. But the resulting music and poetry served the festivals instituted by the Queen Mother, Catherine de' Medici, who was deeply involved in occultism, and as careful a scholar as Frances Yates has recorded the opinion that these festivals were not intended as mere entertainments. Of the Ballet comique de la reine of 1581, in which Jupiter and Mercury are called down from heaven by incantatory songs, Yates writes that 'more probably, for [Catherine], such a performance was in the nature of an extended and complicated talisman, an arrangement of the planetary gods in a favourable order,
invoked by favourable incantations, resulting, not only in a marvellous work of art, but in a magical action by which something was done, by which the favour of the heavens was actually drawn down in aid of the French Monarchy and for the pacification of the wars of religion. The same principle was present, in a less tense situation, at the entertainments for the Florentine wedding of 1589 of the Princess Christina of France with Ferdinando de' Medici. The evening was opened by a magnificent theatrical tableau based on Plato's Myth of Er, showing the Daughters of Necessity turning their adamantine spindle and singing antiphonally with the Sirens of the Spheres about celestial and earthly harmony.

After the establishment of the Bourbons, music and dance were deliberately placed at the centre of court life by Louis XIII and the young Louis XIV, involving the court in elaborate mythological ballets which always represented the triumph of the Good through the agency of the King. These kings and their courtiers took major roles in the productions, dancing and even singing on the stage: it was Louis XIV's appearance in the role of Apollo that first gave him the sobriquet of Le Roi Soleil. These activities seem frivolous unless one recognizes that they, too, were not so much entertainments as magical rites. The great principle behind magical operations in the power of the imagination to bring down a desired configuration from the realm of archetypal images and to imprint it on the realm of earthly events. Anything imagined with sufficient energy will actually happen (the reason that 'faith moves mountains'). If the imaginative energies of spectators and performers alike are repeatedly focussed on the image, say, of the King ruling his subjects as surely and as irresistibly as the Sun rules the planets and elements, then this will (and did) occur. The fact that the heliocentric cosmology was simultaneously becoming common belief among the French savants no doubt had something to do with this. And in another mode, the geomantic placement of Versailles at the centre of a star of roads radiating to every part of France empowered the same image of the monarch's centrality. But with the King's withdrawal from participation in the ballets, apparently because his advisers no longer thought it dignified, the public use of music for magical purposes came to an end.

Taking up again the thread of purely speculative music, we find that
the most eminent Renaissance theorists such as Gaffurius (1451–1522), Glareanus (1488–1563), and Zarlino (1517–1590) all pay serious attention to musica mundana and humana in their treatises. These men were primarily humanists and systematisers of musical theory, and one of their main interests was the recovery of Greek sources. Gaffurius, for example, unable to read Greek, studied the Platonists in Ficino's versions and commissioned Latin translations of Ptolemy, Aristeides Quintilianus, and Bryennius – three of the foremost Greek theorists. He displayed his new-found learning in his own books, and naturally it included much besides the material on Greek tunings and tone-systems which all these theorists expounded at the greatest length. Gaffurius was able to publish Ptolemy's system of astro-musical symbolism and Aristeides' opinions on music and the descent of the soul. Glareanus summarizes and evaluates the classical parallels of notes, planets, and Muses. Zarlino explains the harmonies of the elements and of embryonic formation and recounts the ancient stories of the effects of music. These three men probably knew between them all that there was to be known of the classical speculative tradition.

The tradition, however, is not merely a matter of handing down the scriptures but of embodying for every age the ideas that gave birth to those very scriptures. Ptolemy's astrological fantasies are part of the tradition and were real enough in their own day (they seem to have been the great astronomer's last testament), but the new age needed to imagine the cosmic harmonies in a way that accorded with its recently acquired knowledge. Johannes Kepler (1571–1630) read Ptolemy's Harmonics with admiration, but realized that it needed critical revision and completion. After many years of painstaking calculation and meditation, he demonstrated in Harmonices Mundi (1619) how the planets' relative speeds in elliptical orbits around the Sun do indeed make what we recognize as harmonies, both in music and geometry. Regard for Kepler and for the harmonious universe which was revealed to him has never died on German soil: it was kept alive by the music theorists who will be mentioned later, by the German Romantic writers, and by Hans Kayser and his followers in this century.

During Kepler's lifetime he was embroiled in a dispute with Robert Fludd (1574–1637), whose Utriusque Cosmi Historia (1617–19) had also proposed an elaborate system of planetary and microcosmic music.
Kepler criticized Fludd's ideas for their lack of foundation in astronomical fact, not perhaps recognizing that the cosmic scales of Fludd, apparently shifting as the mood took him, were never supposed to correlate mathematically with the physical planets. They employ the symbolism of the replication of the scale in different octaves in order to illuminate the manner of correspondence between the elemental, planetary, and angelic realms, and the reflection of all these in Man. Some of the difference between the two thinkers, as well as their spiritual kinship, can be felt from a couple of brief extracts. Fludd writes of his symbolic monochord, whose string joins the Earth to the Hand of God:

Here we can gaze with open eyes on that admirable harmony made by the two extremes of the most precious and the most vile, and how they concord with one another; and we see how the intermediate spirit of the world, the vehicle of the soul, is the nexus maintaining them in peaceful concord and harmony; and that God is he who gives breath to the human music or plays the monochord string, or is the internal principle producing as if from the centre the consonant movements of all things and the vital activities in Man, the Microcosm.29

Kepler contemplates not emblematic diagrams, which he calls Fludd's enigmas, but the heavens, in which he senses the presence of the Planetary Intelligences:

Spirits, Souls, Intellects, images of God the Creator, set in charge of their bodies to govern, move, increase, preserve and also propagate them . . . [who] observe the same laws as their Creator: laws derived from geometry.

. . . The following books will offer two shining examples: that of God the Creator, who has distributed the motions of the heavens in harmonic proportions; another of that soul which we call sublunary nature, which controls meteorological phenomena according to the rules of proportions which occur in the radiations of the stars.30

Two Roman Catholic authors of the same century, Marin Mersenne (1588–1648) and Athanasius Kircher (1602–80), were less original than the Protestants Fludd and Kepler (whom they treated with suspicion),
but nonetheless form with them a great quartet of universal minds obsessed with music. Mersenne’s Harmonie Universelle (1637) is the attempt of a Minorite Friar and a Cartesian to describe a cosmos harmoniously created in all its parts without straying into occultism or pagan superstition. Consequently, it tends toward the opposite extremes of mechanistic description and a mystical piety so lofty that music disappears from it altogether, as in this passage:

As for those who have risen above everything created, and who have felt a thousand times the distaste which one has for all the truths of Mathematics and Physics as soon as they are discovered . . ., they get no enjoyment from concerts, preferring singing at the unison to that in parts: for the unison represents for them the state of the Blessed and the perfect union of the three Divine Persons who are in the unison of perfect equality. And because the unisons we make here are not perfect, those who rise above everything corporeal and begin to unite in ardent love with God receive no satisfaction from unisons . . . and they are happier to hear no singing at all, so as not to be distracted from their thoughts of the uncreated Unity, on which they are so fixed that nothing in the world can separate them from it. 31

(One wonders why, in that case, they should mind any distraction!)

Kircher’s Musurgia Universalis (1650), 32 in contrast to Mersenne’s book, is the demonstration of a Jesuit with Hermetic sympathies that all doctrines are safe to describe, if not to hold, and that the world is not only a mechanistic but also a magical place. Its 1200 pages contain as many musical myths, facts, speculations and fantasies as anyone could wish, their climax a grand table of correspondences (one of the last published) which shows the whole of Creation as a network of sympathetic vibrations. Musurgia remained on the shelves for a hundred years as a source of musical curiosities and as the inspiration of a pious and elevated attitude towards the miracle that music indubitably presents. It was read by generations of Italian and German provincial musicians (including J. S. Bach), who in their own way carry forward the Golden Chain, now drawn rather thin as it passes through the ‘Age of Enlightenment’. For the search for a universal vision of the cosmos through harmony and correspondence, to which Kircher was passionately dedicated, was giving way to the search for a universal
description through mathematics – and not Pythagorean mathematics, this time.

At the end of the seventeenth century the composer and churchman Agostino Steffani, then resident in Germany, wrote a short book entitled How much certainty does music have of its principles? Promising to prove that music is a science, he begins by summarizing definitions of sound from Antiquity to Zarlino, then by explaining how all music is derived from arithmetic. He next moves to the psychology of hearing, and shows his Pythagorean allegiance when he claims that the passions are caused by the four humours related proportionally. The consonant proportions made by the first 6 numbers produce a dilation of the 'spirits' (the subtle vehicle between the senses and the soul), whilst the dissonant ones restrict the spirits more and more, until the worst make even animals flee: hence the wonderful effects recounted by the Ancients. In his praise of the Senary, supported by many symbolic examples, and his conviction that the whole world is harmonious, Steffani belongs firmly in the Renaissance tradition. His book could have been written just as well 150 years previously, yet it was promptly translated into German and reprinted as late as 1760. Andreas Werckmeister, the organist and theorist who made the translation, was himself a writer of short treatises that kept alive the memory of Fludd, Kepler, and Kircher. Here those without the leisure, the library, or the Latinity to tackle those writers could read in the vernacular such familiar thoughts as these:

Now we know that God is a harmonious being, and that a living soul after God's image was breathed into Man by the Almighty Creator, who also arranged the stars in a beautiful harmony and thereby ordered their courses, motion, and influences. We may also know how music was discovered and cultivated by man; for there is no doubt that God himself has imparted this power and science to his own image. . . . For if Man were not harmoniously made, he could not be endowed with this art and these gifts, nor comprehend them. And regenerated Man has these gifts directly from God. I will not deny, moreover, that Man is also ruled by the order of the proportions of the stars, and their movements which cause manifold figures, conjunctions, and harmonious aspects, and stimulated thereby to the art of music.
They could also find in Werckmeister an ingenious interpretation of the harmonic series as a symbol of Christian doctrine:

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<td>C‴‴‴‴</td>
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Octave IV
The melody of the Christian life, in earth and heaven

Octave III
The time of the New Testament, in which the Trinity is revealed

Octave II
The time of the Old Testament, in which the Trinity was concealed

Octave I
God the Father: the time before Creation

The revelation of the Three in One, he says, has its full musical likeness in the major triad c‴e‴g‴ (4:5:6), thus confirming the completeness of the musical senary. But the symbolism goes further, for the middle note e‴ can also be sounded as e‴b‴ to make a minor triad: and these two alternatives reflect the two natures of Christ, divine and human.35

To Werckmeister’s more cosmopolitan and progressive contemporaries such ideas would have seemed, as they do today, the quaint survivals of an outmoded pietism. Can one really dignify them as esotericism? I believe one can, and that a genuine experience of music
as a mirror of Creation is struggling to expression in these, as in the symbolic systems (some of them no less naïve) of the Classical period. The remark on the triads seems to embody a profound insight into the mystery of the major and minor modes which is hard enough to plumb, in all conscience. Men like Werckmeister and Buttstedt kept alive the truths with which we have been dealing all along, and if they were naïve and obscure figures, then I can only quote what the composer-theorist Tartini said on precisely this subject: ‘Do not be concerned with the means which Providence chooses to use for such a discovery, and remember that “God has chosen humble things, and confounded the strong”.’

In Germany, certain provinces were able to remain backward and untouched by the currents of the Enlightenment. But in Spain the modern movement was actively mistrusted by the whole religious and aristocratic establishment. The Enlightenment came from France, whose Bourbon rulers were regarded as very poor Catholics. This led to some interesting survivals. As late as the eighteenth century there was still a chair of Astrology at the University of Salamanca, and up to the end of the century this subject had to be studied for the medical doctorate. It is less surprising, then, when one opens the treatise of Pablo Nassarre, Escuela Musica, published in 1724, and finds, like a perfect fossil, a Renaissance encyclopedia. The music of the spheres, the therapeutic and other effects of the eight modes, the perfect musicianship of Jesus and Mary are all earnestly explained. The most frequently cited authority is Giorgi, the latest Zarlino.

Perhaps the very last of the Renaissance Platonists was Giuseppe Tartini (1692–1770). He had achieved considerable fame as a violinist, composer and teacher before he ventured into print as a theorist with his Trattato di Musica secondo la vera scienze dell’armonia (1754). His favourite authors were evidently Plato, Ficino, and Zarlino: he, too, quotes no later authority. He combines his own practical discoveries in acoustics with theorems concerning the three means (arithmetic, geometric, harmonic) and illustrates his findings by means of a circle inscribed within a square that is partly geometric, partly pure symbol. But, more important, Tartini was convinced that the secrets of harmony had been divinely revealed to him. In Scienza Platonica (after 1762) he admonishes the learned world to ‘conduct itself as it should in an altogether unfamiliar situation, in which [Tartini] is employed in bringing to life,
after thousands of years, the greatest of all the sciences, with the sole exception of revealed theology.’ This science is the last of the five to which Plato refers rather enigmatically in Book VII of the Republic: it is the study of Harmony that complements the fourth science of Astronomy. Tartini says that, considering the present need, he is explaining only its simple grammar. If only it were simple! I hope that someone more at home in mathematics and Italian, and possessed of great patience, will soon digest it for the common good. It appears to me at present as a brave assault on the incommensurability between circle and square, with no weapon but the arithmetic of increasingly large numbers. But Tartini himself must have experienced something momentous in order to persist in these interminable calculations without any hope of recognition. Perhaps his place is more with the musical mystics than with the speculative writers, and his difficulty the mystic’s perennial one of communication.

The century between Kircher and Tartini is a time of oddities as far as our studies are concerned. The real work, both in music and esotericism, was going on elsewhere: in the latter case, mainly underground. One need only mention Jacob Boehme and his posthumous disciples; Elias Ashmole and the development of Freemasonry; the publication of *Kabbala Denudata* (1677); Rosicrucian orders; Emmanuel Swedenborg; Madame Guyon. But none of these had much to do with music. In our subject there is a strange hiatus between the last Baroque Platonists and the first Romantic Theosophers. I do not know whether a missing link remains to be found in the chain of earthly transmission, but I suspect that if there is one it resides in the clandestine world of mid-eighteenth century fraternities, and that historians of Freemasonry would be most likely to know of it. Out of these shadows looms the mysterious figure of Martines de Pasqually, founder of the Élus Coëns, and then, with sudden clarity, there appears the man who styled himself ‘The Unknown Philosopher’, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803), with a fully fledged theory of musical esotericism.

On coming to St-Martin’s sane and elegant prose we seem to breathe a clearer air. There is nothing archaic or Baroque about it; his manner of thought no longer requires an imaginative effort on our part to put ourselves in his position. Whatever his persuasions, he is a modern man, a child of the Enlightenment, just as we are. His first book, *Des
Erreurs et de la Vérité (1775), made public for the first time the doctrines of Illuminism taught by his master Martines de Pasqually concerning the nature and destiny of Man. As far as music is concerned, St-Martin (an amateur violinist, by the way) shared the fundamental conviction that always marks the musical Platonist:

I would urge [my fellows] to believe that, however perfect their musical compositions may be, others exist of another order and more perfect; and that it is only by reason of its greater or lesser conformity to these that artificial Music touches us and causes us more or less emotion.

St-Martin regarded the art of music as intimately linked with the development of consciousness, and as a revealing symbol for metaphysical truths. One might compare his account of the common chord, for instance, to Werckmeister’s. St-Martin first calls the triad the image of the Unity that encloses everything. He likens its composition out of two different-sized thirds to the law of duality that presides over all manifestation, and the addition of the higher octave (as of c' to the triad c' e' g') to the active and intelligent Cause that presides with a double law over all corporeal beings. Now Werckmeister did not even mention the dissonant members of the harmonic series, nos. 7, 11, 13. But in the series there is an interloper between no. 6 (g') and no. 8 (c") in the person of an out-of-tune b'-flat, unusable in practical music. St-Martin has a perfect symbolic reason for it. According to him, even before the beginning of time, there occurred a division between two Principles, the second of them becoming evil. How, he asks, could this have happened? ‘Was it not because the superior and dominant note of the common chord, namely the octave, was suppressed, and another note introduced in its place? . . . the new chord which results from this change is called the chord of the seventh . . . [which] tires the ear, holds it in suspense, and demands (in terms of Art) to be saved.’ So once again Music, with her mysterious blend of consonances and dissonances, is invoked to help us understand the problem of Evil. But for St-Martin, as for all theosopers, there is no doubt of the eventual restoration of primal harmony: for ‘just as after this musical cadence one necessarily returns to the common chord which restores all to peace and order, it is certain that after the crisis of the Elements, the Principles which have fought over them will also regain their tranquility.’
The theme of the perfectibility of Man viewed almost as a natural process independent of any Christian salvation is strong in Romantic esotericism. Perhaps in the Renaissance the ideas of Heaven and Hell and the emotions generated by the wars of religion were too strong for the idea of universal salvation (as Origen and Eriugena had held it) to gain much currency. One must be grateful to the Enlightenment for dispelling these clouds so that the idea could reappear, as in a work of 1787 by Friz Dalberg (1760–1812):

As the tuning of single tones makes chords pure, and the purity of chords brings about the perfection of the whole tonal family, so purification takes place through gradual individual advancement and through the progress of species, genera, and races of spirits, until they are all sufficiently ripe for a higher purity that they can escape from their earthly vestures, return to the Intellectual World, and there become strings of the heavenly lyre on which God alone plays.41

The ascent of the soul has become the ascent of the species.

Dalberg's flowery essays, stories, fantasies – call them what you will – were among the earliest of a typically Romantic genre which was able to blend philosophical ideas with narrative and imagery. In this blending lies the magic of the Romantic writers. No era, besides, has ever been so innately musical. The well-known figures like Novalis, Tieck, Hoffmann, Brentano, Kleist, and Schopenhauer are all musical Platonists after one fashion or another. So are Balzac, Sand, and Baudelaire in France, Wordsworth and Browning in England.42 Thanks to the Romantic authors who are still read, studied, and quoted, some of these ideas are kept in at least figurative currency even today:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter . . . (Keats)

Die Sonne tont, nach alter Weise . . . (Goethe)

Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen . . . (Eichendorff)

Dass mein Leben ein Gesang . . . (Rückert)

La musique souvent me prend comme une mer! . . . (Baudelaire)

When we turn to obscurer sources, the themes are less eloquently put, but their very laboriousness enables them to be expressed more
completely. Here is another extract from Dalberg, describing a vision that can only be understood as taking place in the World of Archetypal Images, where in the same year (1801) Novalis' Blue Flower was sought and found. The Narrator, in proper imaginal fashion, is led by his Anima figure to the revelation of the Intermediate World. Here he visits the Temple of Music, described as it might have appeared in a Renaissance engraving.

‘But that lake,’ I asked, ‘whose waves splash around the temple?’

‘That,’ interrupted the nymph, ‘is the ocean of sound. Through its midst glides the silver stream of song away on its peaceful course. It rises from its source in the dark cavern in those rocky heights you can see in the distance. It is called the grotto of Resonance. Here all musical bodies are brought to life. Its cool interior hides the holy source of the Song, which soon splashes its way out in many varied keys and modulations. . . . Its flower banks are inhabited by the Elementary Spirits of Sound, tender sylphite beings who live only in pure air.’

‘The souls of great musicians turn back after fulfilled earthly lives to this shore, they bathe in the waves of the stream and are purged in the higher secrets of their art in the crystal-clear water of its source.’

Some critics might simply remark that Dalberg has been reading the Dream of Scipio, in which musicians were also promised a return to 'this region'. But the causal chain of literary influences is of scant interest in comparison with the hidden law of artistic evolution that brings symbolic truths before the eyes of every generation in the manner best suited to them. For example, the series of English Odes which were produced each year for the St Cecilia's Day celebrations are an example of a merely literary tradition in which the Harmony of the Spheres lived on in a petrified state. Imitations of these poems persisted into the second half of the eighteenth century, charming and learned maybe, but quite insincere: the topic was not the author's genuine mode of thought, but a pose adopted for special effect, like chinoiserie or the Gothic novel. How different is the use made of these traditions by the Romantic writers, impelled by their own experiences and dreams. There is life in them, not merely learning.

One can see vividly how different the climate had become by the early nineteenth century from some musical visions recorded by three
talented but not particularly mystical women. Bettina Brentano von Arnim (1785–1859) writes to Goethe of how she used to lie on the lawn, listening to her uncle’s orchestra play Salieri, Winter, Mozart, Cherubini, Haydn and Beethoven:

O Goethe! I could impart to you still many visions; yes, I believe that Orpheus saw himself surrounded by wild beasts, who in sweet sadness groaned in unison with the sighs of his song; I believe that the trees and rocks approached and formed new groups and woods, for I also have seen it: I saw pillars rise up, bearing wonderful rafters, upon which beautiful youths balanced themselves; I saw halls in which lofty divine images were erected; marvellous edifices, whose splendour broke the ray of the proud eye, whose galleries were temples, in which priestesses with golden instruments of sacrifice were wandering and adorning the columns with flowers, whose pinnacles were encircled with eagles and swans; I saw these huge piles of architecture wed with the night, the ivory turrets with their diamond tints melt in evening’s purple, and protruding beyond the stars, which in the cold blue of night, like gathered armies flew along, and, dancing in time of Music, and swinging round the spirits, formed circles. Then I heard in the far woods, the groans of the beasts for deliverance; and what besides swarmed before my view and in my fancy. What did I believe that I must and could do? What vows have I expressed to the spirits? All that they required, I vowed for ever and ever. Ah! Goethe, all this have I seen and felt in the green gold-flowered grass. There I lay during the play-hour, and had spread over me the fine linen, which was bleaching there, I heard, or rather felt myself borne up and surrounded by these unutterable Symphonies, which none can interpret...44

For Bettina, music was transmuted into visions of the richness of the Universe. George Sand (1804–76) shows how the transmutation can also occur in the opposite way. In an extraordinary play, dashed off in 1839 just before she left for Majorca with Chopin, she wrote this paean to a cosmos whose every cell is vibrant with music:

All is harmony, sound and colour. Seven tones and seven colours intertwine and move around you in eternal nuptitals. There is no silent colour. The universe is a lyre. There is no invisible sound. The universe is a prism. The rainbow is the reflection of a drop of
water. The rainbow is a reflection of the Infinite; it raises to the heavens seven shining voices which sing unceasingly the glory and beauty of the Eternal. Repeat the hymn, O daughter of the Lyre! Unite your voice with the Sun's. Every golden speck of dust poised in the solar ray sings the glory and beauty of the Eternal; every drop of dew which sparkles on every blade of grass sings the glory and beauty of the Eternal; every wave of the shore, every rock, every thread of moss, every insect sings the glory and beauty of the Eternal!

And the earth's Sun, and the pale Moon, and the vast planets, and all the suns of the Infinite with the innumerable worlds which they illuminate, and the splendours of the glittering aether, and the immeasurable depths of the Empyrean, hear the voice of the grain of sand...

Finally, Rahel Varnhagen (1771–1833) records her own ascent to a world higher still, where imagery is no more. If one were to call Bettina's and George Sand's visions musica mundana, this would be musica coelestis:

Last night I dreamed I heard such a beautiful prelude, coming from on high — or wherever it came from, for I saw nothing — which developed into so grand a harmony that I had to sink to my knees. I wept, prayed, and cried out again and again: 'Have I not said that Music is God; that the true Music' (by which I meant harmonies, not melodies) 'is God?' The music became ever more beautiful; I prayed, wept, and cried out more and more. As if in a radiance, and without thought-forms, everything — the whole being in my breast — became lambent and clear. My heart broke in two from my ecstatic weeping; and I awoke.

Living among such women, need one wonder that the Romantic men also wrote as they did?

The nineteenth-century writers quoted so far may be gloriously inspiring, but if measured against the aspirations of speculative music in the strict sense they are one-sided: all the Romantics are. The great virtue of speculative music, as I suggested in Part I, is that it can bridge the gap between objective (or 'scientific') and subjective (or 'aesthetic') experience. After Kepler the scientific establishment dropped the whole idea, and the tradition of cosmic harmony entered its period of comparative obscurcation. The world into which it resurfaced was one
which had developed an unprecedented gulf between science and the arts. It is the more amazing that a very few, like Goethe and Novalis, were able to work out at least a personal synthesis of the two cultures: for most people in the nineteenth century, and the twentieth for that matter, the gulf remains and one tends to live only on one's own side of it. Only very occasionally in this period does one come across a speculative musician to whom the theory of music and not just its image-provoking qualities is of value. One such is Antoine Fabre d'Olivet (1767–1825), amateur composer, theosopher, linguistic theorist and universal historian, who believed that the cultures of the past had used speculative music as just such a bridge:

Raised to its highest degree of perfection, it formed a sort of analogical bond between the sensible and the intelligible, and thus afforded a simple means of communication between the two worlds. It was an intellectual language which was applied to metaphysical abstractions and from them made known the harmonic laws.47

Fabre was the truest Pythagorean of his epoch. His conviction of the importance of music to human culture may be assessed from the place it holds in his Philosphic History, a very strange work that describes the races and cultures of the prehistoric past and the currents which lead from them up to the present. He says that in the Ancient Indian Empire, which at one time extended over the entire inhabited earth, the religion was one of the Divine Unity until ‘one of the sovereign pontiffs, examining the musical system of Bharata . . . perceived that it was not thus with it and that it was necessary to admit two principles into the generation of sounds.’ As a result, the philosophers were forced into changing their monistic belief to one in an ‘absolute Combined Duality’, the two principles being Ishwara and Prakriti, and the subsequent division of the people in their allegiances to the male or female principle led to schism and eventually to the ruin of the Empire. Fabre promised full details of the matter in his ‘forthcoming’ book on music, of which alas only fragments remain; so it is impossible to say just what was discovered by the pontiff. But there is no doubt, since Ernest McClain’s researches, that the musico-philosophical system of the historical civilizations was invariably dualistic, every musical ratio having its reciprocal value and the field of
musical tone-numbers extending symmetrically in both directions. McClain traces this theory back as far as ancient Sumer, the cradle of known civilization. Fabre d'Olivet's historical vision extends to an earlier epoch of worldwide culture of which theosophers have often written, sometimes calling it Atlantis.

Another French theorist devoted to the understanding of the cosmos through music, but without access to unusual sources, was Paul François Gaspard Lacuria. He lost his teaching post for writing *Les Harmonies de L'Être* (1847), a Christian work which looks for correspondences between the basic numbers and the dogmata of faith. Lacuria also has a dualistic philosophy, very similar to Robert Fludd's, which he expressed in the positive and negative series of numbers. The positive ones symbolize God's creative vision that brings the cosmos into being; the negatives relate to God's beholding of Non-Being. The musical scale, he says, is one of the greatest analogies to this. I think it very improbable that Lacuria had read any of the German Baroque theorists; nevertheless, he gives to the triad the same Trinitarian symbolism as they:

\[
\begin{align*}
B & - \text{ Holy Spirit – Intelligence} \\
A & \\
G & - \text{ Word – Love} \\
F & \\
E & - \text{ Father} \\
D & \\
C &
\end{align*}
\]

Lacuria also relates the dual nature of the Son to the major and minor triads, only here the process takes place through attributing to the Word as an alternative note the 6th degree or A. This concords with C and E to form the minor triad. The major scale, he says, expresses the harmony of the Infinite with itself, the minor that of the finite with the Infinite.

Philosophies based on mathematical duality can apparently take two forms: either they can use, as Lacuria did, the series of positive and negative integers symmetrical about 0:

\[-\infty \ldots -6, -5, -4, -3, -2, -1, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 \ldots \infty\]

or else they can use the whole-numbers and their reciprocals,
symmetrical about 1, as McClain explains was generally the case in the ancient tradition of speculative music:

\[
\frac{1}{\infty} = 0 \quad \ldots \quad \frac{1}{6}, \frac{1}{5}, \frac{1}{4}, \frac{1}{3}, \frac{1}{2}, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 \quad \ldots \quad \frac{1}{\infty}
\]

The second is far preferable musically, because each number can correspond precisely to a tone. If 1/1 is c' ("Middle C") for example, the above series, translated into string-lengths, gives the tones:

\[
M \quad m
\ldots \quad g"' \quad e'" \quad c'" \quad g" \quad c' \quad c \quad F \quad C \quad A^b \quad F' \quad \ldots
\]

which comprise within the Senary and its reciprocal the notes of the major (M) and minor (m) triads, and no others.

The wealth of symbolism which is opened up by this idea is scarcely believable until one has studied something of it. I have written elsewhere\(^1\) of its first revival in the 1860s and 70s by Albert Freiherr von Thimus and some of the subsequent currents in musical esotericism, bringing my survey of the "Golden Chain" up to our own time. In that article I called the highest task of speculative music 'the solution through music of the metaphysical enigmas surrounding Man.' A hundred years ago Dr William Wylde, in a lecture at Gresham College, summed up in similar terms the labours and revelations that still await those who, like Orpheus, serve the God of Beauty and Intelligence:

Truly then may music be considered as one of the most truthful and analytical of all art revelators; as one destined to become the speech of the future, the interpreter of the most secret problems of nature and the powers of the human mind.

Long as the race has known and loved music, keenly as its occult influences have been felt and blindly acknowledged – its profoundest meanings are as yet only just looming up before us in the form of a true musical science.\(^2\)

Notes

1 Dionysius the Areopagite, Mystical Theology and the Celestial Hierarchies, trans. the Editors of the Shrine of Wisdom (Brook, Surrey, Shrine of Wisdom, 2nd ed. 1965), p. 58.

2 Ibid., p. 50.

Also known as *De divisione naturae*. Several musical passages are conveniently gathered in Otto von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral* (New York, Bollingen, 2nd ed. 1962, pp.125-6), a book which traces the theology of light and harmony from Dionysius to the builders of Chartres.


Ibid., II, p.57.


Ibid., p.67.

This extract from an unpublished Ms. is given in Peter Dronke, *Fabula: explorations into the uses of myth in Medieval Platonism* (Leiden, Brill, 1974), pp.102-104.

Ibid., p.106.


Quoted from Walter Grossmann, *Die einleitenden Kapitel des Speculum musicum von Jean de Muris* (Leipzig, 1924, repr. Nandeln, Kraus, 1976), p.96. I do not have access to the recent edition of Kilwardby’s *De ortu et divisione philosophiae*, from which this comes.


Ibid., p.159.

Ibid., pp.119-20.

He seems to have been the first to envisage a moving, polyphonic music of the spheres. His *De Musica* of 1434 was edited by Giuseppe Massera and published Florence, Olschki, 1961. For the polyphonic music see Day 1, sects. 148-151, for the correspondences sects. 156-167.


Yates, op. cit., p.176.

The music of the Florentine *Intermedii* of 1589 has been edited by D. P. Walker: *Musique des Intermèdes de ‘La Pellegrina’* (Paris, C.N.R.S., 1963). In 1982 it was performed in
London under the direction of Andrew Parratt, and broadcast throughout Europe by the BBC.

27 On these entertainments, see Robert M. Isherwood, Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century (Ithaca, Cornell, 1973).


30 From Kepler, Harmonices Mundi, ed. Max Caspar (Munich, 1940), p.105.


33 Agostino Steffani, Quanta certezza habbia da suoi principii la musica (Amsterdam, 1695), translated as Musikalisches Send-Schreiben (1699–1700).


35 Condensed from Werckmeister, Musicae Mathematicae Hodequs Curious (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1687, facsimile by G. Olms, Hildesheim, 1972), pp.141–149.

36 Johann Heinrich Buttstedt, Ut Mi Sol, Re Fa La (Erfurt, 1716).


39 The work remained in Ms. until the above edition.


41 Johann Friedrich Hugo Freiherr von Dalberg, Blikke eines Tonkünstlers in die Musik der Geister (Mannheim, 1787), p.10.

42 On the German Romantics, see Richard Benz, Die Welt der Dichter und die Musik (Düsseldorf, 1949). For the others, see for example the last chapter of Balzac’s Séraphita, Wordsworth’s On the Power of Sound, Browning’s Abbé Vogler.


45 George Sand, Les Sept Cordes de la Lyre (1839), Act II, scene 1.


47 From Fabre d’Olivet, La Musique expliquée comme science et comme art (c.1813–1815?), ed. L. Cellier (Paris, Chacornac, 1910), ch. III. This is the fragmentary remains of Fabre’s musical writings.


Supplementary note to Part I: The Epistle on Music of the İkhwan al-Şafî is available in an English translation by Amnon Shiloah, published by the Department of Musicology, Tel-Aviv University, 1978.
Turkish Mosque
Reviews

Eleagiac Poet


Harman Grisewood and René Hague described the making of this volume as 'a work of literary archeology', the excavation of a burial mound which they suspected of containing a treasure hoard - many thousands of sheets of paper on which over the years David Jones had written his attempts to express 'what he saw, felt and was part of'. Fastidious craftsman that he was, he only permitted the publication of what he considered 'finished beauty' and even then regarded those poems as no more than parts of an unfinished whole, subtitling the Anathemata for example, as 'fragments of an attempted writing'. What his editors have given us in this volume is their selection of what Jones himself at different periods put aside as not yet good enough. Embedded among them are earlier drafts of what we already have in The Sleeping Lord and for that reason there is some repetition. But by far the greater part of The Roman Quarry is new and we must be immensely grateful to Harman Grisewood and René Hague for enabling us to enjoy so much delight that would otherwise have remained buried and out of our sight. And there is no risk that the poet's reputation will suffer; he may not have found the 80,000 lines given us here wholly satisfactory, but much of the hoard is certainly treasure to those who already admire him, and the introduction together with 65 pages of commentary by René Hague (who sadly died shortly before the book's publication) will help those coming new to David Jones to begin to appreciate how much gold there is.

The material is arranged in four sections. The first comprising The Roman Quarry, The Narrows and Under Arcturus has as its general theme the contrast between things at the centre of the Roman Empire and those at its Celtic fringe; the second consists of three pieces which have the Mass as their common starting point; the third, again of three pieces, is particularly concerned with the Crucifixion, with the events which led up to it and the significance of it; and lastly there is an extended version of The Book of Balaam's Ass of which only a part has hitherto been available (in The Sleeping Lord).

Three pieces may be singled out to give some idea of the range and richness of the material. The Roman Quarry opens with the ruminations of a Roman legionary (speaking in the terms and tones which the poet had heard from veterans in France in 1916) talking of his fellow legionaries who hailed from
Britain. What mad chaps these Celts are, with their dreamy ways, born of the watery misty lands from which they come. But they'll get smartened up when Rome has civilized them – and the brassy voice of the old sweat fades and the poet begins to utter, picturing Ichthus, the primordial fish, and other original animals of the Celtic world sounding the alarm at the approach of a new kind of animal, man;

and all cry, Beware!
Ichthus comes, all cry Ichthus comes who knows all things... Ichthus of the three liaisons, who mirrors in his saucer-eye the feathered things and the things of fur when he breaks the rippled filament of the water-sphere to drink the atmosphere.

His solitary eye that slipped the first fisher's double-barb, has seen what the falling feathers tell that tell what the owl of the cwm was told by the stag of the thousand winters, what the water-ousel saw above the estuary-bar on world-floor, where anthropos walks so proud – so young he is — O yes, so young and late in time he is he thinks he can measure all things that are before he was the fledgling of earth-time so young he is he knows nothing, yes yes, so young he is he has not yet learned to sit still.

And all cry: beware, the most young of these youngest, these come, more active than any yet that have come, they borrow from all, and because of their ingenuity they surpass all, and they understand less than any.

The seer goes on to describe the advance of Empire – civilized men ordering the gentle wilds, bridging their frolicking streams and slashing indiscriminately through valley meadow and wooded hillside to make straight the way of the Romans into the heart of Wales – and the poem merges into what is already familiar to readers of The Sleeping Lord and The Hunt.

The third section has for its setting the city of Jerusalem at the time of Christ’s crucifixion. Its opening piece titled The Old Quarry Part 1 starts with a description of the celebrant and congregation at a High Mass, but now a turning point is reached and the celebrant comes to begin the Canon itself and he knows now at this turn the way deepens here – after this latchet, at this vault’s narrowing – as sea-change, or snow-line reached... Here a maker turns a hard corner.

He’s at the frontier and place of situations. There’s struggle here...
and Christ must ride into the alleys of Jerusalem and go to Upper Room, Gethsemane and Calvary — which is what the Mass is all about and which is the subject matter of the rest of the poem.

After The Agent, in which the events of Holy Week are seen through the eyes and mind of Judas Iscariot, there comes The Old Quarry Part II. Here the scene shifts to a lunch-party in the centre of Jerusalem while the day grows ominously dark and a young Jew is dying on a cross outside the City wall. His crucifixion is the starting point of a conversation between three Romans; an old blimp, a young subaltern and one of the girl friends of the latter. Their tabletalk is a brilliant piece of observation and reporting in the terms and tones of Belgravia or Imperial Delhi in the 1930s. The retired colonial administrator holds forth at length to the others on 'the white man's burden':

You know nothing, nor understand what is expedient. I've been in these parts upward, should say, well, let's put it at thirty, and thirty falls is a fairish slice. Some of you, well, I'll not speak of that, it's all one now, but undoubtedly, I don't think — no one will dispute me, I hope — we were stayers — in those days we were what I should call stayers — could take a knock and give one.

The administration first, number one last, that's how it was . . .

O I agree, very likely, very nice, but if every inverted gnostic coming eating and drinking to break their nonsensical taboos is to be protected at Caesar's, that is to say our, expense — no he did the only thing — the fellow had to swing.

All of which, with the attitude behind it, is respectfully swallowed by the young subaltern but highly provocative to the girl — a soldier's daughter, born and bred in the Raj, intelligent and artistic, a sympathetic observer of the natives and their culture and religion. With a mind very much of her own she is scornfully critical of her class and the Empire it serves, and she has a soft spot for its victims — including the one whose trial and execution has sparked off their conversation:

But as for this man there's nothing amiss with his like condemnation.

He's all [of] a piece as an artist should be, and to great artists all things serve a turn — whether amicable or inimical — if life or here death — no swing so take a roundabout and show you're fly to turn all things to beauty for beauty's sake — and so make hares of them all. This so-called Jew at least has had his say has sabotaged convention has put a few over on the men in black has tilted at the windmills
of both the bugbears – is sublimely conscious of his
mission is without fear or has overcome it – believes
his derivation to be uncommon – doesn't give a damn
for anything because he so offers himself to all as to
make the dark weal on either smitten cheek feel like
that infusion that lips give when lovers bruise
each other – is master of the labyrinth and indeed,
as I gather he has hinted, its original engineer, by
whom all things are, who would guide all men safe in
the meander, is invulnerable because without armour
– took flesh either in a Bedlam or was begotten on
Olympus – I can't say. When they delivered sentence:
Ibis ad crucem – I guarantee he heard it as groom in
a world other from ours might be expected to hear
his banns . . .

The last piece in the book is The Book of Balaam's Ass. But although belonging
in many ways to the poet's earliest In Parenthesis period it is well placed here,
treating of many of the themes dealt with earlier but now wholly in a 20th
century setting: the London Zoo, the coast of Sidmouth, the battlefield of
Passchendaele, the army camp on the Hampshire heath which for David
Jones symbolizes all that is false and ugly and godless and a-natural. Here are
touched on many of the subjects dealt with in Epoch and Artist but here also
are passages which can be taken by themselves and enjoyed as individual
treasures – like this, on going into a field where cows are and . . .
stiff-legged calves who make the gradual fields skip
like imagined hills, play erratic circles to accuse
the static adults, drifting on stubble-sea, or set
heavily like islands humped . . . They eat hay all the
day long. Their slow bellies remember one thing
perhaps. Their eyes question you at the field-latchet,
they seem to have seen things like you before. Each
man walking they question. They seem almost to rumble
you. They startle when you come on hind-legs at
them; you come fore-paws waved to shoo them off. You
subdue imperiously with fragile man's-hand, bellowings
and forest-might. You scorn crumpled or bright horn
that gored the burning cat with your anthropoid
gestures. They sheer away and turn to regard you,
their perplexed bull-brain can't untangle, no key to
open, no twitch of tail or hairy ear clears the
tormenting buzz of memory – the bovine race-myth not
unravel. Short-horn lows to this frustrated Hereford
– long-lashed bends her corrugated forehead to the
immediately consoling grass.
Or this descriptive catalogue of the properties of all works of art which, for David Jones, included pre-eminently the makings and doings of Jesus Christ:

... the finished beauty that wins enchantment, gathers worship, holds the minds of men, becomes a word to work powerfully, generates makers' marvels, is a star for us, breaks our contingent misery with the noise of its perfection, day by day wins exaltation for us ...

Such passages are not rare; there is scarcely a page of this book opened at random, under all sorts and conditions of time and place, from which I have not immediately found lines evocative and stimulating and refreshing. Since its publication in 1981 I have read it constantly both at home here in Britain and on three drives across the length of Europe to the far south of Greece. To read it in the Mani was to subject it to a severe test. In that stony and arid peninsula of gaunt mountain and stern coast, its depopulated villages of fortified houses and mule tracks wandering among olives writhing for existence between slabs of rock and jungles of prickly pear, it was a source of living water that never ran dry.

But that environment brought into startling clarity one thing I miss in David Jones' work. The Mani has scattered about it some 30 small medieval churches which were the particular objectives of my visits to the area. Those structures, with their drums and domes, their patterned brickwork and above all their dark interiors glowing with frescoes, are powerfully evocative of Byzantium and all that the Orthodox Church has preserved of a Christian tradition more primitive than that preserved in the West. But little of that Orthodox tradition can be sensed in the writings of David Jones, and the soil of Byzantium was not one into which his roots had penetrated, so that while the crucifixion of Christ is his central point of reference, he rarely celebrates the resurrection triumph of Christ Pantocrator or sounds the powerful note of Easter joy and hope. I find that regrettable — but not surprising. David Jones had endured and survived that hideous experience on the Western Front which In Parenthesis and the middle section of The Book of Balaam's Ass represent so passionately; and he came to feel more and more strongly that the cultural soil of the West (in which his roots did indeed run and went down so very deep) was being turned into a desert, what he calls The Zone in The Book of Balaam's Ass, by mindless men and monstrous machines. It was perhaps inevitable that the author of A, a, a, Domine Deus, of which earlier versions appear in the book under review, should always have been an elegiac poet at heart. But elegies have a haunting beauty peculiar to themselves, and are particularly fitted to refresh the dry spirits of those who today have as their Lord one who knew that before there can be resurrection there must be death — and cried from his cross 'I thirst'.

Michael Stancliffe
Gaelic Oral Tradition


Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist. Margaret Fay Shaw. (Second edition 1978, first published 1955.)

Poems of the Dispossessed, a bilingual book of Irish verse, is intended less for scholars than for readers of Gaelic and for English readers who wish for some insight into Irish Gaelic literature and oral tradition; and for a third – perhaps not the smallest – group who will read the book for the sake of its distinguished editor and translator, Thomas Kinsella; whose now celebrated translation of the Tuin was first published (also by the Dolmen Press) in 1969.

In Ireland the Bardic tradition managed to survive, in however restricted a form, until in the mid-nineteenth century the Great Famine saw the end of the unbroken continuity of a culture that, originating in the courts of kings, ended as the last, long-treasured heritage of the poor. With Douglas Hyde and the creation, in the 1880's, of the Gaelic League, came a revival of the Irish language and poetry and the beginning of the Irish renaissance whose English flower is known to all but whose Irish roots have remained invisible to all but a few. Yet in a country where history has traditionally been recorded (and therefore created) not by the politicians but by the bards, more people remember Douglas Hyde as an honoured poet than as the first President of Ireland.

Many of the poems here collected are already well known in other versions by Hyde, Kuno Meyer, Frank O'Connor, or more recently John Montague, or indeed in earlier translations by Mangan and others. Of these probably Douglas Hyde's are more dated than most; Yeats observed that for Hyde horses were always steeds and cows kine; and Thomas Kinsella's language has by contrast a fine cutting-edge that well suits the bitterness of the literature of a subject people. Where Hyde wrote:

I am Raftery the poet,
Full of hope and love,
With eyes that have no light,
With gentleness that has no misery,

Going West upon my pilgrimage
By the light of my heart
Feeble and tired
To the end of my road.

...
Behold me now
And my face to a wall,
A-playing music
Unto empty pockets.

Thomas Kinsella gives us:

I am Raifteiri the poet, full of courage and love,
My eyes without light, in calmness serene,
Taking my way by the light of my heart,
Feeble and tired to the end of my road:
Look at me now, my face toward Balla,
Performing music to empty pockets.

But sometimes there is a lyrical breath of charm in Hyde’s translations that
Kinsella’s more austere line misses. Hyde wrote:

Black Head, Darling, Darling, Darling,
Black Head, Darling, move over to me,
Black Head, brighter than swan and the seagull,
He’s a man without heart that gives not love to thee.

— and Kinsella:

My own dark head (my own, my own)
Your soft pale arm place here about me.
Honey mouth that smells of thyme,
He would have no heart that denied you love.

Whether or not this be a more accurate (or a variant) version, had my hair
been dark I would have moved over to Douglas Hyde’s rhythmic incantation
rather than to Thomas Kinsella. He is not a naturally lyrical or musical poet –
again one might compare Mangan’s Dark Rosaleen with ‘The Little Black
Rose’ here included. But Thomas Kinsella excels in the bitter vein of
O’Rathaille:

The drenching night drags on: no sleep or snore
No stock, no wealth of sheep, no horned cows.
This storm on the waves nearby has harrowed my head
— I who ate no winkles or dogfish in my youth.

He excels too in the wild grandeur of the Irish keen; as in the famous lament
(by his widow) for Art O’Laoghaire. In this passage the dead man’s horse
returns and his wife mounts it:

I gave a leap to the door,
And a second leap to the gate
And a third on your horse.
I clapped my hands quickly
And started mad running.
As hard as I could
To find you there dead
By a low furze-bush
With no pope or bishop
Or clergy or priest
To read a psalm over you
But a spent old woman
Who spread her cloak corner
Where your blood streamed from you,
And I didn’t stop to clean it
But drank it from my palm.

In the distraught incoherence of the woman’s speech as Kinsella has captured its impetuous broken rhythm the event is present before us. The ‘spent old woman’ is far stronger, uniting the terrible image of the Ban Side with Eibhlin O’Laoghaire’s realization of her own future self than Frank O’Connor’s an ‘old old’ woman; and ‘where your blood streamed from you’ has a terrible immediacy (lost in O’Connor’s metaphorical ‘in torrents’) that makes of the moment the very heart and heart’s blood of the great lament.

The keen is, of course, a woman’s art; and the translator who has so well caught the wild pride of Eibhlin O’Laoghaire’s lament can give us also the pathos of the unheard voices of the poor; as in this prose translation from the diary of a Kilkenny schoolmaster, written in 1828:

I’ll never hear a cow of mine calling to her calf or young again, nor a mare of mine snorting to her foal or colt, nor sheep of mine bleating to her lamb, nor goat bleating to her kid, nor my hen clucking to her pullets and chickens, nor my cock crowing. And I won’t see my white duck or my speckled drake again, or my hatching goose or my lovely white gander, nor the lake out on the bog. And I won’t hear the crane calling in the marsh, nor the scream of the wild goose, or the marsh-plover piping or the moor-plover whistling or the bleat of the jack-snipe. I won’t see the cormorant and I won’t hear the moorhen bubbling. And I’ll never drain the pool again for eel or pike.

He has put me far from all that, that man who murdered Pog Ni Steafra and my poor tormented husband and my poor ruined family. The sweet mint with the white tips won’t grow again for me in the meadow by the pool, nor the white or red clover in the dry meadow. I’ll plant no more flax-seed, nor lift the flax nor steep it in the pool. I’ll never again draw the thread from the wheel or the distaff, or make any more yarn. The wheel for my flax and wool is in the ditch. My cupboard is out in the sandy trench, and my table out on the bare bank; my cooking-pot is on the waste ground and my chair is out in the rain; my bed-straw is coverless, without a sheet or a blanket. I’ve no cap for my head and no cloak or covering for my body. The rent-collector took them with him for arrears, o it’s wretched hard...
The greater bitterness and the wilder grief of the Irish as compared with the Scottish Gaelic poetry may nevertheless not arise from the sufferings of Ireland having been at all times greater than those of neighbouring Scotland, but rather because the bardic tradition survived longer. There was a larger and less scattered community to support its bards; although indeed some of O’Rathaille’s poems are very close to Scottish Gaelic examples like those quoted on p.10 in which the ‘big house’ still holds some of the magic of a long vanished world:

quilts got ready morning and evening,
fair-haired women tossing the feathers,
wine broke open and drunk in uproar,
spits of meat and tables of whiskey,
crowds for the great house merrily heading

In such courts the bards had been honoured; a situation recalled by Yeats in his play The King’s Threshold; and

Scholarly semi-professionals still subsisted in large numbers during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in rural communities. On occasions throughout the year, in places where literary traditions were strongest, they gathered together in ‘courts of poetry’, recited their compositions, exchanged manuscripts, and engaged in extempore repartee in verse. As time, and the conquest, proceeded, it is their voices that more and more emerge as the voice of the community.

In Ireland, as in Scotland, the last political hope died with the defeat of Prince Charles Edward Stuart at the battle of Culloden; yet popular verse continued to be composed and sung – for in Scotland (with few exceptions, like Merriman’s Gargantuan ‘Midnight Court’) poetry and song were inseparable. And is there not in the stance of Raftery and O’Rahilly an echo of ‘the world before Kinsale, when love, learning, religion and human behaviour could be contemplated at leisure’? Their complaint is far from the self-pity of an individualist romanticism: rather it is a protest against the dishonour into which the Bardic culture and the Irish nation has fallen. O’Carolan’s harp, treasured at Clonalis House, traditional home of O’Connor Don, stands as witness to the unbroken continuity in Ireland of the traditional relationship of the Bard with the court of king or chieftain. The poets are the voices of a conquered people united in historic memories of saints and kings, a landscape given imaginative wealth by its holy places, and by the burial-sites of a vanished race, invisible inhabitants of fort and rath still remembered in a living epic tradition whose echoes even now can be heard in the oral Gaelic tradition both Irish and Scottish.

Yeats, whose Irish Renaissance itself grew from that rich soil, knew how to value a culture whose refinement and dignity puts our secular materialist
society to shame; and again it is Yeats who found words for that especial
delight which is communicated through no book save the unwritten Book of
the People. In The Celtic Twilight he describes a gathering of song and dance by a
roadside in Galway:

Presently a score of men and boys and girls, with shawls over their heads,
gathered under the trees to listen. . . . Then some of the men stood up
and began to dance, while another lifted the measure they danced to, and
then somebody sang Eiblin a Ruin, that glad song of meeting which has
always moved me more than other songs, because the lover who made it
sang it to his sweetheart under the shadow of a mountain I looked at
every day through my childhood. The voices melted into the twilight,
and were mixed into the trees, and when I thought of the words they too
melted away, and were mixed with the generations of men. Now it was a
phrase, now it was an attitude of mind, an emotional form, that had
accompanied my memory to older verses, or even to forgotten mythologies.
I was carried so far that it was as though I came to one of the four rivers,
and followed it under the wall of Paradise to the roots of the trees of
knowledge and of life. There is no song or story handed down among the
cottages that has not words and thoughts to carry one as far, for though
one can know but a little of their ascent, one knows that they ascend like
mediaeval genealogies through unbroken dignities to the beginning of
the world. Folk art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought,
and because it refuses what is passing and trivial, the merely clever and
pretty, as certainly as the vulgar and insincere, and because it has gathered
into itself the simplest and most unforgettable thoughts of the gen-
erations, it is the soil where all great art is rooted.

The third and last volume of Hebridean Folksongs translated by Dr John
Lorne Campbell of Canna completes the author’s devoted life-work as one of
the leading scholars and collectors of the Scottish Gaelic oral tradition. When
in the first decade of this century Mrs Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser collected her
Songs of the Hebrides, and still when in 1901 Alexander Carmichael published the
first volume of his Carmina Gadelica, the field was rich, the songs known and
sung in still populous Gaelic-speaking communities both in the Isles and on
the mainland. They were part of a way of life little changed over centuries in
which women milked their cattle, spun their yarn and wove their tweeds, all
occupations lightened by songs whose strong rhythms were proper to these
occupations. The men, boatmen and fishermen, had other songs to the
rhythm of oars. It was still – and to some extent remains – a way of life in
which men and women had each their own skills and tasks – almost one
might say cultures — giving richness to the relationship between the sexes, that distance and difference without inequality which is the age-old human norm.

The integrity of that culture barely survived the second world-war. From that time, with the death of every old man, every old woman, a treasury of remembered songs and stories was lost; for their only libraries were their boundlessly retentive memories. Dr Campbell and Margaret Fay Shaw (Mrs Campbell) are among the last to have known this way of life and its riches of song unsurpassed in any other European folk-tradition.

When from 1929–35 Margaret Fay Shaw lived on South Uist tape recorders did not exist; her transcriptions were laboriously made, with the patient help of the singers, as had been those of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser; which are less accurate but remarkable enough to have created a vogue in their day, a significant though late contribution to the Celtic Revival. Dr Campbell and his helpers have since been able to make hundreds of recordings from many singers both in the southern outer Hebrides, some from the next generation of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's informants, and in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia; where there are still many Gaelic-speakers — thanks (if that is the word) to the eviction of whole communities from the mainland and the Isles to make room for the more profitable sheep. But the modern talent for mechanical invention which made these recordings possible was at the same time helping to destroy the culture and way of life of which these songs are the expression.

In the very kitchens where an evening's entertainment used even twenty years ago to be a ceilidh with songs and story-telling, the same families, young and old, are to be found gathered round that most culturally destructive of all modern devices, the television-set. Dr Campbell's work has been done just in time.

Some of the songs can, by historical events mentioned in them, be assigned to the seventeenth century or earlier, and Dr Campbell believes that many of the tunes may be much older. From the legends of the Fianna, Finn's dog Bran has (in a world where a huntsman's and a shepherd's dogs play so large a part in his life) outlived in memory many a hero. But the golden age of the Scottish Gaelic song-writers flowered from the heroic events of the 'forty-five'.

Of the waulkings, at which the women sang themselves into a transport as they wrung and thumped their lengths of tweed, Dr Campbell recorded songs at what was probably the last such occasion to be held in South Uist, at Garinish, on March 29th 1951. The occasion was probably little different from that witnessed in 1848 by Robert Somers, described in his Letters from the Highlands; except that the women would have sat at a table using their hands rather than their feet:

An old woman, of most matriarchal appearance, rested upon a bed; the remainder of the company were young people of both sexes, seated on stools, chests, and bundles of sticks, round the sides of the apartment, while the centre of the floor was occupied by a group of females.
employed in fulling cloth, and singing Gaelic airs to their work. The whole scene was worthy of the pencil of a Hogarth, but the most substantial part of it was the process of fulling, which was certainly new to me. A roll of thick blanketing was laid down in the middle of the floor upon a frame of wicker-work. Two young women seated themselves on each side of it, facing each other, and at such a distance as to allow their feet to rest upon the cloth. Another female stood at the end, for the purpose of turning the roll, and keeping it in a proper state of moisture. When everything was ready, the leader of the band started her song, in which all the others joined, beating time with their feet upon the cloth, and growing in fervour as they became heated with the exercise. When wearied with this double labour of the voice and the feet, they rose from their seats, and a new band assumed the task, till the elderly matron announced that the cloth was sufficiently fulfilled. The wild shrill airs that were sung, coupled with the general aspect of the place, gave a truly savage character to the scene, and reminded me of some of Catlin's descriptions of the customs of the American Indians. The old woman informed me that such was exactly the way in which cloth was fulled in her young days.

The waulking songs belong very much to the women's culture; and praise by the woman of the beauty and dignity of the man she loves is indeed no less frequent than praise of the woman by the man. In few poetic traditions has the genius of women found so rich an expression — not only as singers but as poets. Often the praise of these makers of fine cloth takes a form appropriate to their own skills:

My love's for you, O Donald,
You were the comely youth.

A suit well becomes you
Of the dearest cloth from England.

With hose upon your feet,
And thin shoes with tanned soles.

And pretty garters,
I would like to fold them.

And striped trews
On your chalk-white thighs.

Or again:

Well suits my sweetheart
a pretty black shoe with latchet,

Well the hat with cockade suits you,
with a favour of the king in it.
What a world of difference between the poetry of women who love and admire their men from the strident voice of 'liberated' women who see no beauty because they feel no love.

The fidelity with which oral tradition transmits both song and history is well known to folklorists; a retentiveness undiminished among the Gaelic speakers of Cape Breton, where Dr Campbell has collected songs or versions of songs no longer surviving in Scotland itself. The Bardic tradition of the Celtic race (common to Ireland and the Western Highlands) existed in order to transmit and preserve the memory of kings and heroes and heroic events; become a popular tradition it retained this character. Many, perhaps most, of the songs commemorate actual events (some though not all also part of recorded history) and this accuracy of transmission is of the essence of this culture. I myself remember Hugh MacKinnon, the last Bard of Eigg, telling in his kitchen circumstantial stories of the people who had lived in a village whose only trace was the outlines of the foundation of vanished houses in the green turf; stories tragic, romantic, comic, heroic, supernatural; many within living memory. Yet this Bardic transmission is an art, a recording of deep experiences of the heart, not of mere events; it belongs to a culture, not to the archives of a record-office. As such the memory of the race is both the expression of its genius and the formative influence upon the hearts and imaginations of its inheritors; for literacy and culture are by no means the same thing. Yeats understood that comprehensive human richness of 'the Book of the People'; many of the tales of The Celtic Twilight he had from 'Paddy Flynn, a little bright-eyed old man, who lived in a leaky and one-roomed cabin in the village of Ballisodare':

He was a great teller of tales, and unlike our common romancers, knew how to empty heaven, hell and purgatory, faeryland and earth, to people his stories. He did not live in a shrunken world, but knew of no less ample circumstances than did Homer himself.

In this sense the corpus of songs of the 'Forty-five' is itself essentially bardic. And indeed even the technique of the fili (Bardic poets) who when composing lay in darkened rooms was preserved in South Uist in the habit of the composer of a poem lying outstretched on a bench with his cap over his eyes. Such events as have captured the imagination and moved the heart in turn enable the singers and their listeners to form themselves according to the virtues the songs remember; the more so as the same mountains and isles, the same harbours and sounds, and indeed the very names found in the songs, are unchanged. Calum, Neill, Patrick, Margaret, Annie, Catriona, are combined and recombined with the MacDonalds, MacIsaacs, MacKinnons, MacLeods and MacIntyres and the rest, like figures in a dance continually reforming the pattern of 'the tall yellow-haired man', 'the well-born youth
with the brown plaid' with 'the young brown-haired lass' and 'the yellow-haired woman who climbs the steep hillside.'

Old accounts speak of the 'hypnotic' combined effect of the singing and the rhythmic labour which transformed heavy toil into a celebration and expression of a great musical tradition. Indeed there is a quality in those old voices recorded by Dr Campbell (and other collectors) which transports the listener (how much more the participants) into a state of imaginative exaltation. In this the refrains of wordless syllables, at once enhancing the rhythm and bringing into strong prominence the words themselves, play a great part, not to be experienced in the reading of a text on the page.

Margaret Fay Shaw was struck, in the course of her work on South Uist, by the fact that the singers never thought of their songs as a 'setting' of words to music: a song is a single, indivisible whole. On one occasion she suggested that a singer, even if she did not remember the tune, might remember the words of a certain song. The idea was met with astonishment that it should be thought possible to remember the one without the other. Thus, although we are necessarily given the words and the tunes separately, the song as such has to be re-created before it exists in terms of the Hebridean art of song. The literary reader may indeed find much to admire in the poems (the originals or Dr Campbell's fine translations) but these are still remote from the rhapsodic, rhythmic, ecstatic singing in an 'untempered' scale which must be heard to be experienced. With whatever care the musical reader may learn the tunes and sing the words to them, he (or she) would still not possess the secret of their true singers. It takes many generations to master such an art.

However, read as poems, the songs are rich in that imagery of fine and precious things which Yeats observed in the related inheritance of the Irish poor. Not for them the bleak and unsustaining social realism prescribed by their political masters for the urban proletariat! These descendants of bronze-age craftsmen, of the artists of the Book of Kells, or of the Vikings whose intricately carved stone crosses are to be found in many of the Isles besides Iona, know that the work of Imagination, never forgetful of lost Paradise, is to enrich and transform. Yeats in his preface to Lady Gregory's Gods and Fighting Men wrote that:

Such poetry, as it seems to me, desires an infinity of wonder or emotion, for where there is no individual mind there is no measurer-out, no marker-in of limits. The poor fisher has no possession of the world and no responsibility for it; and if he dreams of a love-gift better than the brown shawl that seems too common for poetry, why should he not dream of a glove made from the skin of a bird, or shoes made from the skin of a fish, or a coat made from the glittering garment of the salmon? Was it not Aeschylus who said he but served up dishes from the banquet of Homer — but Homer himself found the great banquet on an earthen floor and under a broken roof...
This imagery of rich and marvellous things does not come from a world of fantasy but rather from an inherited admiration for craftsmanship by shipbuilders and weavers and metal-work by people such as themselves, only finer, more brilliant and precious — pins and brooches, silks and ivory combs, 'a purse of ferret-skin' or 'a thin new tight ribbon, though it cost a crown a yard.'

She gave me a fine cloak, and silk gloves off her hands,
She belonged to the race of the gentry, who had red cattle in the meadows.

Often the effect of something rich and dazzling is produced by the placing together of the familiar and the rare, so that the familiar becomes rare, and the rare familiar:

Hunter of deer from the mountain forest,
Of the grey seal from the shore of the ocean,
The little roe deer that moves proudly,
With a handsome silvered leather belt
Above his white linen garment,
O son of the earl of the white banners,
I saw your ship on the salt water,
She had a rudder of gold and two masts of silver,
And shrouds of silk from Galway,
Thick russet silk from Spain,
It was not from Glasgow that it came,
Nor in Dunvegan, of no great height.

or

My king's son is coming to Scotland
On a great ship with three masts of silver,
With ropes not made of hemp or horse hair,
Of silk from France is her cordage,
Golden pulleys at each rope's end

— poetry which is, for all its fantasy of silver and gold the work of people no less accustomed to handling boats and tackle than to observing them like visions of silver and gold in the distances of still seas. There is nothing otherworldly about the richness of an imagery that seems to remember Byzantium, with whose treasures the Viking ships returned laden.

The crofting communities of the Highlands are democratic but their imagination is of kings and sons of kings. Does even the enduring legend of Prince Charles Edward Stuart itself owe some of its glory to earlier folk-memories of 'the sons of the kings of Norway', Viking Chieftains whose graves are to be
found throughout the isles; or to the kings of Ireland and Dalriada with whom the clans had ties of blood, and whose 'sun-houses' were in a world of isolated shielings and much poverty places of music and dancing and feasting? Such memories surely enrich the praise of clan chieftains and their houses:

Their food would not be a thin scone,
But a baker bread a-baking,
The sound of beer filling tankards,
The sound of wine poured into glasses,
And whiskey of triple distilling
And strong brandy from the Lowlands.

On lonely Eriskay (where the song was collected) what richness in the thought of festivities at the houses of Clanranald and Glengarry and Cameron of Lochiel:

I knew the custom of your household,
A cow being flayed, a pig divided,
Gentry seated round white tables,
Slender gray hounds with golden leashes –

or in another version

I know your ancestral custom,
A great open house with swept flooring,
A good hostess there presiding,
With bright maidens at their sewing,
With closed rooms there above them.

– closed rooms rather than 'black houses' with a hole in the heather thatch for the smoke to escape and the rain to come in.

* * *

This Celtic gift of creating a sense of the rare and the marvellous has enriched the culture, if not the purses, of the Gaelic people both of Scotland and of Ireland. J. M. Synge well understood this when in The Playboy of the Western World he makes an old Islander tell of an attack of delirium tremens on the mainland where he was 'screeching in a straitened waistcoat, with seven doctors writing out my sayings in a printed book'. The genius of his race was at work formalizing a memorable experience into what might in earlier centuries have become one of the many 'formulas and formulistic statements which can be applied to almost any situation'. The laughter of Synge’s more sophisticated audiences arises from the discrepancy between the splendour of the image and the plain prosaic fact. But at the same time – and this is surely the secret of Synge’s art – he understood that the Aran islanders lived in a world enhanced by the sense of wonder, and all the wealth of the marvellous known to the author of the Odyssey but lost to the harassed staff of a modern provincial hospital dealing with disease.
There is indeed a Celtic 'other world', surviving side by side with that of the Church. Yet the sense of the marvellous lies — certainly in Dr Campbell's three volumes — rather in an enhanced way of experiencing this world than in fantasies of another. The eye of the imagination transforms, but does not depart from, nature. 'Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?' Yeats asks himself, thinking always of Ireland and its oral tradition; and he wanted to create once more 'an art where the artist's handiwork would hide as under those half-anonymous chisels, or as we find it in some old Scots ballad'; and he measured himself as a poet always against that tradition. 'Elaborate modern psychology sounds egotistical, I thought, when it speaks in the first person, but not those simple emotions which resemble the more, the more powerful they are, everybody's emotion . . .'. What the poet hoped to bring about in the national imagination of all classes in Ireland had long, as in Scotland, existed in the Gaelic culture. The marriage of the imagination of the people of the Hebrides and the Western Highlands to their mountain isles, their castles and harbours and sea-routes, to byre and hazel-wood is the product of a continuous enriching of these by the lives of the succeeding generations and gives its peculiar intensity to this poetry of a people delighting to be the heirs of an ancient race, and a beautiful land. How different from the 'romantic' vogue of scenery created by late eighteenth and early nineteenth century travellers is this poetry of men battling with land and sea on which their livelihood and survival depended. The sense of beauty and the passionate love of scenes and places is inwoven with the very struggle for survival; as in the stormy crossing of the White Swan:

On Saturday we rowed
to go northward sailing

We were racing her through the sounds
when to her masts her sails we hoisted

Passing Rubh' an Dunain
there was thick mist round the hilltops.

Passing the head of Loch Einart
we got a glimpse of the moor.

We made MacLeod's Maidens at the mouth of Loch Roag, while she was at full speed.

We dropped an anchor at each side of her,
and my beloved skipper gave us a dram.

Often I'm thinking of the party, picking
nuts in the (hazel) wood.

This is taken from a song in which youth and girl, separated (a common
theme) by the sea, each remembers a happy day gathering nuts in the hazel-
wood. While the boy is at sea the girl is a hired worker in the Lowlands:

   Sorrowful am I this year, long I feel
two thirds of springtime.
   Often I recall the party, picking nuts
in the (hazel)wood.
   Now I am sad, stranger in the
Lowlands.
   Reaping on a rigg alone, in competition
with a stripling.

   Had I not carelessly cut my hand, I would
have hoped to beat him.

The girl's dejection is implicit in her having carelessly cut her hand. The
lovers' story is all in their actions - picking nuts, reaping or manning a boat.
They don't stand back to admire those scenes with which their lives are
woven. Or again, in the song 'Sorrowful am I in the land of bent grass and
spindrift' the girl laments 'the man with the yellow back hair' from the isle of
Heiskeir west of North Uist:

   Your boat is drawn up on the fine white machair.
   Your peats have not been heaped, saddest tale it is to tell.
The window of your room has been closed by a sand-drift.
   You were a boat's skipper in bad weather against a sea of drowning.
   You would steer her dry while your lads were lying stretched out.

All too common in the Isles is a beached boat and a house falling back into the
sand and turf from which it was precariously raised. No-one will touch boat
or house of the remembered boatman.

There is sensitive description, too, of the beauty of bird and beast but, again,
seen with the eye of huntsman or fisherman for the world on which life
depends:

   You were the hunter of the wild goose
   that takes flight quickly,
   And the brown moor-hen
   who raised her brood in the cold nest,
   And of the grouse,
   A small bird of hard pinions.

or

   The hunter with the slender gun
   Who lays the swan upon her side,
   The little roe with slim short feet,
   And the blackcock on top of the heath.
Every isle has its songs praising its beauty; and in those litanies, reminiscent of the Iliad, in which the clans are numbered who will fight for Prince Charles Edward Stuart, the men and the places they come from are scarcely distinguished, place enhancing the dignity of the men, and the men of the places of their origin – Sleat, Glengarry, Glencoe, Kintyre, Lochaber, Kintail, Strathspey and the rest. The monuments of famous deeds in the Highlands are the mountains themselves.

The Book of the People, the work of many generations, has over the years selected and refined certain essentials of the enduring, ever-recurring themes of human experience, enhanced to a simplified and essential depth and grandeur. In a world of few and enduring loves and loyalties men and women have found fulfilment and dignity not in restless search for novelty and so-called self-expression but in forming themselves to certain age-old and fundamental norms discovered and explored by the generations. From the songs they learn to love and to mourn the dead before the need for the knowledge has even arisen. In Spain, in Greece perhaps, similarly rich folk traditions have survived, characterized also (as in the Spanish dance) by controlled and formalized courtship relationship and mourning of the dead;

For how but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
— by no means a prerogative of an ‘educated’ or a ruling class.

Edwin Muir, himself born into a similar world in the Orkneys (though Nordic rather than Celtic in race, language and culture) wrote in his Autobiography of what he calls the ‘fable’ to which any individual life can only approximate yet which is common to all:

It is clear that no autobiography can begin with a man’s birth, that we extend far beyond any boundary line which we can set for ourselves in the past or the future, and that the life of every man is an endlessly repeated performance of the life of man.

This must be more clearly experienced in any archaic community where, according to the circumstances of life and the genius of the race, generation after generation has learned to feel, to experience and to understand those deep essential human potentialities which have enabled an illiterate race to live lives of a refinement of feeling and conduct that shame their materially richer but culturally poorer supplanters. Nor indeed is admiration and envy what the ‘natives’ of the Isles have felt towards their more sophisticated neighbours:

Shepherdess, you must be watchful always
For fear that the pursuit may catch up with you when Rory is not near you,
Lest the brown-haired scholar who knows English takes you with him out through the hill side.
This gently courteous implicit contempt has baffled many would-be benefactors from the South who have thought to 'improve' and modernize the ways of life on the Isles.

But the mores that rule the lives of the people are rules rather of the heart than of a moral code. Dr Campbell points out that sexual relations, as such, before marriage, are not considered wrong; the less so in a Catholic society where sometimes for more than a generation no priest would come (priests were proscribed in Scotland) to perform marriage ceremonies. What the songs blame are broken promises and heartless abandonment. Even now though the songs are being replaced by the latest 'pop' hits, and the last of the story-tellers, like 'the Coddy' of Barra, were dying off in the 1950s and '60s; while the English taught in schools has in the course of three generations all but replaced the Gaelic as the spoken language, certain of these virtues and qualities of life have endured. For how long can those 'traditional sanctities', virtues of the human spirit, survive? The last page of the Book of the People has been written; and although faint echoes may linger in the Gaelic poetry of (for example) Sorley MacLean of Skye, the frontiers of the imagination of an ancient race have been invaded by the culture of the television-set and the supermarket.

But Robert Somers (quoted above) expressed the mentality of the utilitarian nineteenth century when in 1848 he wrote of the waulkings:

> It forms, no doubt, a good fireside amusement; the young people seemed very fond of it; but it appeared to me incompatible with the comfort and cleanliness which should reign in a kitchen, and undoubtedly it is a slow and laborious process compared with the fulling-mills. The toil expended from which their sisters in the south are relieved by machinery, would do a great deal to put their houses in order, of which they stand in much need.

And so to the compulsory grinding of the meal at mills, where it was taxed, while inspectors went round breaking the traditional (and laborious) stone querns; with other modern improvements of the same ambiguous kind.

Utilitarianism versus the richness of life; are these irreconcilable? Perhaps not only the means but the ends are different and the answers the two cultures would give to the age-old question, 'What is Man?'

Indeed the old ways involved an unremitting struggle merely to survive on barren soil and stormy seas in a harsh climate where there could be no certainty that a season's labour would not be destroyed by a wet harvest-time. Some idea of the hardship (but also of the merriment) of that life may be gathered from Margaret Fay Shaw's Folksongs and Folklore of South Uist, where for years the author shared that life with the Islanders. But from the struggle came music and dance and the fine characters of men and women who rose to the demands for skill and resourcefulness, courage and cheerful hearts. Glasgow is itself a Highland city, whose slum-dwellers had exchanged (not indeed from choice but from the pressures of the poverty Robert Soames observed)
the culture of their ancestors for an urban barbarism. Again, Edwin Muir whose own family was driven from Orkney to Glasgow for like causes has well described that exchange. There is no going back, of course, the enthusiasm of the self-sufficiency movement (a nostalgic urban, not a rural development) notwithstanding. The dignity of toil is undermined when its necessity is gone. It would be foolish, not courageous, to carry heavy creels of seaweed from the shore to the 'lazy-beds' to grow potatoes obtainable more cheaply from the mainland; or, for that matter, to fill the tweed with buckets of urine when it can go to Somers' fulling-mills. Yet those inventions that have lightened labour have destroyed skills, and the age-old unity of a life where labour was lightened by song, courage called for every time a fishing-boat put out to sea. The very demands of that life evoked the finest qualities in men and women, from which, in turn, their culture flowered. While we cannot, obviously, go back to the old ways, their memory can serve to remind us of the gifts and latent potentialities of simple humankind; unevoked, indeed too often starved and perverted, in a society which seeks to feed the body but starves the spirit.

Kathleen Raine

Poetry and 'The Great Human Family'


Czeslaw Milosz begins his 1981–82 Norton Lectures with a disclaimer. He will not talk about poetics. As he confesses: 'Frankly, all my life I have been in the power of a daimonion, and how the poems dictated by him came into being I do not quite understand.' Therefore these lectures are to be limited to the history of literature. The ambiguity is intended. History is a witness and so, although Milosz proposes to deal with the witness of poetry — what poetry witnesses — he himself, as historian, will witness also, and do so from a certain point of view: as a twentieth century Polono-Lithuanian and as a poet.

He begins with the former, graphically depicting his 'corner' of Europe as depending upon three axes, different and yet the same. The North–South axis situates him between Rome and Byzantium, Latin and Greek and Slavic, while the East–West axis articulates a tension between Europe (particularly France) and the native cultures, languages and values of the Septentrion. This tension was real and determining at least until Yalta. Then, as Milosz says, a break occurred 'and Parisian intellectuals used to having their ideas and books admired beyond the Vistula, the Dnieper and the Danube, woke up to find themselves sentenced to provincialism.' In other words, the Eastern European experience of the years 1914–1945 made any expression that had not assimilated that experience and the consequent realization of an absolute
need for spiritual-cultural renewal, irrelevant. The quiescence of western intellectuals in the face of massive transformations going on elsewhere – from Warsaw to Saigon – could only appear as provincial. In view of this, the final axis Milosz proposes is perhaps the most fundamental. This is the axis of Past-Future, which is perhaps the Classic-Romantic axis viewed principally (where it was masked horizontally in the first two). For the Romantic, believing as did Mickiewicz, patron poet of Polish poetry, in 'the basic goodness of the world sustained by the hand of God and by the poetry of the common people,' poetry is essentially eschatological. It depends upon hope – a theological virtue: 'The fate of poetry depends upon whether such a work as Schiller's and Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" is possible,' writes Milosz. For such works a vertical orientation is unquestionably necessary. Without a vertical axis not only is hope impossible but, because it is impossible, 'things fall apart, the center cannot hold,' as this century only too demonstrably shows. Twentieth century poetry as a witness testifies to a 'serious disturbance in the normal perception of the world.' It does so, however, until recently, only unconsciously. Bohemian nihilism, laying itself down before the juggernaut of positivism, testifies not to hope but, as Milosz says, to the evident lack of it. Yet, as testimony to the sickness, it is perhaps a first symptom of a cure.

In his second lecture, Milosz situates himself as a poet in the lineage of his distant relative Oscar Milosz, whose A Few Words on Poetry he quotes and comments on. For Oscar Milosz, poetry, 'Organizer of the archetypes,' is 'the passionate pursuit of the Real.' Furthermore, 0. Milosz writes: 'That sacred art of the Word, just because it springs forth from the sacred depths of Universal Being, appears to us as bound more rigorously than any other mode of expression, to the physical and spiritual Movement of which it is a generator and a guide.' This Movement, of course, is love – the love which moves the stars – and poetry or incarnation is an art of love or rhythm. But poetry, at least since Goethe and Lamartine has become 'tainted with preoccupations of an aesthetic and nearly always individualistic order.' Therefore, it has not expressed 'any internal, mental or spiritual operation,' i.e. any archetypal universal function. Thus, over the past century and a half, poetry has become ever more recondite, specialized, subjectivized, with the twofold result that it has become inaccessible to an uninitiated reader while the poet has become an 'alien, asocial individual, at best a member of a subculture.' Thus arose what Oscar Milosz called 'the schism between the poet and the great human family.' Far from being a Marxist or any other kind of materialistic millenarian, Oscar Milosz, like Blake, as a visionary-prophetic Romantic, cannot separate poetic renewal from socio-spiritual renaissance or resurrection. The Romantic, being eschatological by definition, is a 'New Ager' from the start. What Czeslaw Milosz as a poet and (in this sense) a Romantic, is concerned with, is the return of poetry and the poet to a position of meaning and relevance. How is this to happen? The question is even more poignant when we realize it occurs by disaster whether we will or not. 'When an entire community is struck by misfortune, for instance, the Nazi occupation of Poland, the "schism
between the poet and the great human family" disappears and poetry becomes as essential as bread. The problem is that, though this is true, the enormity of the situation, its spiritual consequences, nevertheless remain unthought and unexpressed. Though poetry becomes 'relevant,' it does not necessarily rise to greatness. 'Few are daring enough.' From Milosz's point of view this means that poetry has not been able to 'connect the time assigned to one human life with the time of all humanity' – in which connection alone lies the seed of eschatological hope.

The following lectures deal with details of this situation. There are, first, the consequences of Darwin's second Copernican revolution by which was removed the singularity and uniqueness of human life and the barbarism of nature as conceived by the Cartesian mind was substituted for it. As Dostoievsky, in this as in so much else preternaturally prescient, saw most clearly, this was above all an attack on the meaning of human death. Human life and death after Darwin became just another statistical variant in nature's prodigality. Milosz quotes a poem by Wilsawa Szymborska in which body and soul, life and art, become 'the flesh and a broken whisper:"

On one side the throat, on the other, laughter, slight, quickly dying down.

How else could it be, in a world polluted by the premisses and images of positivism, relativism and materialism? As Milosz writes: 'Could we without perishing withstand a situation in which the things surrounding us lose their being, where there is no true world? Twentieth century poetry answers that question in the negative.' Who can think the situation through to its end, who can look it in the eye? Milosz instances Simone Weill as one of the few who realized the destruction of values and was unafraid to speak her mind. Simone Weill may be called 'reactionary,' yet, as Milosz points out, a trahison des clercs undoubtedly occurred. For Milosz himself, a Polish poet, this betrayal was facilitated by the classicist temptation 'to surrender to merely graceful writing.' 'The passionate pursuit of the Real,' for Milosz, means that the Real and not convention must determine form, style, and content. From this point of view, language itself, closed by habit, must be pried open – as in the late poems of Rilke and the poems of Celan. By fidelity to the Real, Milosz maintains, 'a poet discovers a secret, namely that he can be faithful to real things only by arranging them hierarchically.' I.e. he discovers a transcendent order. Poetry is therefore a form of love and 'the poet appears as a man in love with the world, but he is condemned to eternal insatiability because he wants his words to penetrate to the very core of reality.'

In his fifth lecture Milosz turns specifically to Poland, 1939–45, as to a laboratory. He finds culture on trial: history, language, social life are accused; but hardly understood. And yet poetry, in certain poems, allows an organization of experience that is a first step towards understanding. At the same time, the 'subject' demands the simplest treatment and thereby the artificial wall between the Bohemian and his human family is broken down. Poetry
begins to provide a stable element in an unstable, meaningless world. Similarly, poetry begins to endow that world—of objects, perceptions—with stability and meaning, despite the madness of the time. Between history and tragedy, silence and the howl of desperation, poetry, the human power of attention, begins to speak, albeit sutteringly. And what it speaks, what is spoken, is at least a guarantee of humanity, a guarantee of what it is to be human, despite the fragility of humans, their civilizations and cultures.

Clearly, however, one cannot look to a holocaust for hope. Hope must come from elsewhere. Nor are the stakes just literacy. Milosz is quite clear that humanity and its planet as a whole lie in the balance. Global transformation proceeds at unimaginable speed. For Milosz the crisis betokens a coming of age—'humanity's emergence as a new elemental force.' Whence is guidance to come? Milosz believes history will prove to be the privileged metaphor following that of biology. Hope will come from history, from 'the dimension of the past of our human race.' Like Collingwood, Milosz believes that out of existential (Pascalian), physical and biological solitude, 'humanity will increasingly be turning back to itself, increasingly contemplating its own entire past, searching for a key to its enigma, and penetrating, through empathy, the soul of byegone generations and of whole civilizations.' An example of this is Cavafy. For Milosz as for Cavafy, humanity transcends Nature, and lives by memory of itself, in History. The best example of what Milosz means is contained in the poem placed as epigraph to these lectures:

My generation was lost. Cities too. And nations.
But all this a little later. Meanwhile, in the window, a swallow
Performs its rite of the second. That boy, does he already suspect
That beauty is always elsewhere and always delusive?
Now he sees his homeland. At the time of the second mowing.
Roads winding uphill and down. Pine groves. Lakes.
An overcast sky with one slanting ray.
And everywhere men with scythes, in shirts of unbleached linen
And the dark blue trousers that were common in the province.
He sees what I see even now. Oh but he was clever,
Attentive, as if things were instantly changed by memory.
Riding in a cart, he looked back to retain as much as possible.
Which means he knew what was needed for some ultimate moment
When he would compose from fragments a world perfect at last.

Christopher Bamford
Tool or Machine?


The Engravings of Eric Gill. Christopher Skelton, 572 pp. 13½ x 10½. £110.

A Holy Tradition of Working will not be an easy book for the generation which thrived on the Sixties and the change that came about in those years, especially in art education. Gill will be written off as a 'medievalist' and pushed to one side. His language will not appeal to the slick age of mass instant media and throw away wastage. It may well be a hard book even for the generation which has recently rediscovered the life and work of Ethel Mairet, Ananda Coomaraswamy's first wife; Thomist thought is generally quite simply a stumbling block. Gill's contribution requires interpreters and being recast if it is to appeal. When The Bodley Head reissued Art in a changing society in 1950 (with appendices by Rayner Heppenstall and G. M. Turnell) it was difficult going and eyes even then settled on odd paragraphs which glowed as gems, but the book as a whole was hard to read. The value of Brian Keeble's selection is that it makes Gill's thought more readily available, clearly set out under various headings; however, it will still call for interpreters, for words like 'sacrament' are meaningless to the young to whom the essence of Gill's thought naturally addresses itself.

We find ourselves in times when the art world is perhaps, because of financial cuts, being forced to stir from its bohemian slumber, when many young persons are struggling to find employment and, not least, a role in society. A number turn to the crafts in search of an alternative way, quite prepared to face a life of austerity. Surely, William Morris and Eric Gill should be amongst their mentors! Yet there seems to be little hope of art education returning to a sure craft foundation for the movement is towards making the arts somehow to align with the world of industry. In this context the Golgonooza book must be important, providing interpreters are found to communicate its substance to those who are intuitively looking for it.

The attraction of reading Gill is that he simply, if somewhat naively, exposes the fallacy of modern economy — an outlook based on the vortex of industrial production with its insatiable appetite for the earth's limited resources and its total disregard for the delicate balance of nature. Gill sees the machine as an instrument for profits, ultimately imprisoning society in an ever-increasing illusion of 'undisciplined fancies'. He clearly shows consumerism to be but the treadmill of a subtle slavery to a society which has no notion of the social good other than a free enterprise serving the lowest common denominator of the prevailing consumer demand. The loss of the artisan craftsman is readily seen as a main cause for society's destabilization, creating a situation in which the young, because of the 'consumer' vogue for academic qualifications, cannot discover a genuine apprenticeship. Now that society can no longer find the role to keep a generation fully occupied, the inflated cost of what is
most natural to mankind — work — has become a reduction to absurdity, that is, 'the production of measureless quantities of worthless makeshifts'. (William Morris).

Brian Keeble’s introduction begins by invoking the names of W. R. Lethaby and Edward Johnston, key personalities to the period when the crafts still found a role in society with relative ease; but now we contend with the wake of modern architecture, leterset and a different feel for the printed word. The last of the old craft world was willingly, for the most part, destroyed in the Sixties by the educational establishment in favour of a proud basic design world built on sand. Old, magnificent presses, which today would fetch a fortune, were broken up, bookbinding equipment and once treasured tools were thrown into rubbish skips, litho stones were taken away to pave gardens, whilst valuable books vanished from libraries. Harder still, teachers of the ‘old’ school were dismissed, or alienated and often ridiculed. The thread handed down from Morris was severed, new words became fashionable, like ‘not relevant’, ‘moribund’ or ‘redundant’, and life was to become ‘groovey’, whatever that meant! Empty canvases filled desolate walls and iconography was debased to the residue realm of modern graphic art. Surely, what happened was the educational parallel to Bultmann’s curse of ‘demythologizing’.

The new Golgonooza book must take its stand in the aftermath of modernism and perhaps its role is that of raw material to be used in a growth towards renewal.

On looking through The Engravings of Eric Gill (Christopher Skelton, 1983) the reader will discover the artist’s world of the sacred and the erotic. The modern world sees continuous publication of what goes under the title of ‘the erotic arts’; the texts are verbiage and the illustrations generally repulsive, far removed from the world of eros. The cause is so simple, for it is only in a sacred tradition that eros may find its true focus. Separated from the holy it is exiled from its life-force and sinks into the Malebolge of Dante’s Inferno, where the health of the intellect is soon lost.

Gill’s work excels in arabesques and linear forms which flow and twine to intoxicate the eye. The quality emphasizes his perception of life as sacrament and cosmic dance. His interest in calligraphy and the art of the printed word reveals the influence of his teacher Edward Johnson and of Coomaraswamy, and the recognition of the high vocation of words as the source of dialogue and the presence of the Spirit. After reading the selected writings in Keeble’s edition, it is both good and instructive to relax into the visual image which may in an instant convey words and thoughts to fill volumes.

John Allitt
The word poetry, and the vocation of the poet, implying as it does a serious and absolute commitment to one's art, and by that I mean a way of life in which there is no separation between the life and the writing, has come increasingly to be relegated in importance or confused with verse — that minor avocation of the journalist or academic. In Sheila Wingfield's work there is no clouding of the issue. Her voice is unmistakably that of a serious poet, a conviction realized in childhood and built upon with a consistency sustained from her earliest to the most recent of her poems.

In reviewing a volume of Collected Poems, one is doing no less than pass judgment on a lifetime's labours, or rather the quintessential truth of that life, the experiences, emotions and feelings that are, if the art is true, the one durable monument one would preserve of that life. The rest, that is, the living, becomes diffused; the crystallization is in the poetry. And this is precisely what Sheila Wingfield has done. Her poems have a rightness of tone, and an incisiveness of natural detail that luminously isolates the moment of poetic conception. There are no abstractions here or social platitudes, things are seen sharply with the darting of a bird's eye, and thus seen for the first time. The compression is marvellous.

I think Odysseus, as he dies, forgets
Which was Calypso, which Penelope,
Only remembering the wind that sets
Off Mimas, and how endlessly
His eyes were stung with brine;
Argos a puppy, leaping happily;
And his old father digging round a vine.

In the way that poetry pares away all matter which does not resonate on the tension-thread between life and death, here the heroic narrative and circum-navigations of Odysseus' life, is at the moment of death sharpened to one scent, that of the sea-wind off Mimas that stung his eyes with salt-sleet. The poem has a saline brightness, it resembles a seabird's feather left on the beach as a monument of some great storm. The storm of dying.

Sheila Wingfield's poems draw on the perennial sources of poetry; folklore, the Greek classical tradition, the Bible, myth, the natural world learned both from her native Hampshire and her adopted Ireland, all of which are compounded into a mosaic modulated by the tension of the age in which the poet lives. Sheila Wingfield is highly conscious of her own time, and in the poem 'On Being of One's Time' she gives eloquent expression to her individual moment balanced against that of the timeless moments of the past. I quote the last stanza accordingly:

I think Odysseus, as he dies, forgets
Which was Calypso, which Penelope,
Only remembering the wind that sets
Off Mimas, and how endlessly
His eyes were stung with brine;
Argos a puppy, leaping happily;
And his old father digging round a vine.
Am I committed purely to the moment?
No, with carved Hittite kings flaying
Prisoners alive (a thought abhorrent
As a fallout dread);
Fish-eaten Shelley rolling with the tide;
The twelvepenny dagger still in Marlowe's forehead;
Dying Keats watching the boatmen; and my nose twitching
From the flesh Spain burnt. Small wonder Zeno
And his arrow rused
Whole ages; while Plotinus, in a great stride
Of reason, fretted about Time: its flow,
And if what's at our throats, and gone, are fused.

What we have here is an extraordinary fusion of historic moments, the past recurs in the present so that each of the images takes on a prismatic fluidity as well as a frozen isolation. We seem to see and feel the deaths of the great – the decomposition of Shelley, the blood jetting from Marlowe's head at Deptford, Keats aware of his own imminent death, and we feel too the vibrantly reasoning shift of Plotinus' thought, and against these great moments are balanced the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War, and the still greater impeding cataclysm that oscillates over us pendulum-wise from East to West, the terror of nuclear fallout. What this stanzas has done is to set up a current in the stream of history. We sit still and watch the images nose past, each encapsulated by a terrifying isolation.

The space allotted to a review does not allow me to do justice to Sheila Wingfield's long poem 'Beat Drum, Beat Heart' which Sir Herbert Read called 'the most sustained meditation on war that has been written in our time.' Rather I have chosen to concentrate on her shorter lyrics with their consummate technical skill, their highly individual organization of subject matter, and their cutting away of the waste marble until the corresponding poem is lucid and almost epigrammatic in compression. In a way her poems are maps; they are the right way through difficult terrain; but they are not an easy exercise in cartography for the poet. The cross-currents and tensions inherent in such a journey are given voice to in Cartography:

Does this smack
Overmuch of water? But one's
Life can be a voyage
To Cythera: in black
Storms; faint calm; or else uneasy from cross-currents
Of what's difficult or fluent.
As there's no finish to our quirks, beliefs,
Distorted theories and failing reasons,
We might embark
For coasts that wear a greener plume,
Where caverns rest the mind in dark,
Leaving a crystal-shattered spume
Outside. No light can gauge
Hollows and sudden gaps, or chart
Those devious reefs
And unsure soundings of one person's heart.

Here the voyage is both spiritual and metaphysical - our personal failures in life, our inability to find a synthesis for our fragmented philosophic theories, are all loose nerve-ends, part of the tension that is the contradictory state of man. There's no easy voyage to Cythera, and if we recall Baudelaire's poem we remember how on approaching the island by sea, the poet's vision is arrested by the image of a crucified man who is ferociously dismembered by vultures. Sheila Wingfield is vitally aware of this irreconcilability of opposites. The paradise that we miss in our journey is one of 'coasts that wear a greener plume, / Where caverns rest the mind in dark, / Leaving a crystal-shattered spume / Outside.' These lines portray a world that is too beautiful for us to enter outside of the imaginative embodiment of the poem.

One of Sheila Wingfield's poetic gifts is an eye for the aesthetically curious, a detail derived from reading or verified by perception of the natural world, and around which a poem comes to be built; and this may accentuate the difference between pin-eyed and thrum-eyed primroses, the audio-frequency of swarming bees in response to metal objects banged together, or it might be the contrast in roses between Rosa Mundi, with its double pinkness, and the damascene of York and Lancaster. Her details are never incidental or trivial, they are part of the knowledge from which she writes, part of the mosaic she endows with fibre and unity.

Always when she writes of Ireland, she writes well. Two beautiful poems from the collection 'A Cloud Across The Sun' should be quoted in full for their conciseness and elegiac tone. The first is simply called 'Ireland.'

This is the country
That has no desolation, no empty feel
(The pagan kings are always there)
In ruined abbey, ruined farmhouse,
Slab of cromlech, or a wheel
Travelling a bog road
Through Calary's too quiet air.

In seven lines one is given an evocation of place that corresponds to the poet's deepest intuitive promptings. One comes to know a place by a complex association of inner and outer symbols, and at a sign, which may be that of a raindrop expanding to concentric circles in a pond, followed by another and another raindrop, the whole landscape rushes to fit into place. This is how poetry comes to be written and explains why with such simplicity and absence of metaphor, the above poem evokes rather than paints a peculiar landscape. This apparent effortlessness is repeated in 'Ross Abbey.'
The cowpat track and dusty bramble leads
To childhood’s riverwet and glistening meads.
O dear Ross Abbey! ruined, with a tree
Grown through you, how your presence lived in me
With images, persistent and devout,
Of a loved brother, weed and frog and trout,
Until that middle-aged, that rainy day
I saw you once again, then looked away.

Here the journey between childhood and middle-age is accomplished in eight lines. It is not the landscape that has changed, ‘The cowpat and dusty bramble’ remain, as do ‘weed and frog and trout.’ It is rather that the poem hinges upon a mood – the grey light associated with rain and the middle years is responsible for the demagnetization of place. What has been lost is realized as too painful for further contemplation. The self that has been left there must haunt the ruin; the ongoing self must exorcise all but the memory of place.

These poems of a lifetime are a welcome and enriching contribution to English poetry. They pursue no fashion and will remain for as long as there are readers of serious poetry. It takes great courage to pursue a poetic commitment, and Sheila Wingfield has manifested this ability both in her life and in her work. Right to the end she has been prepared to follow that journey which leads to a still greater one.

And yet you might prefer
A small, bitter flurry of wind
Battling the tide, its touch pocking
Harbour water into cross-currents and then
Slapping the sea-wall
As you set out, with a stubbed
Dip of dinghy oars – excited
By a smell of kelp, tar,
Wet ropes, half-rusted iron – to the moored
Sailboat waiting for you
With its coffin-like and solid planking.

Romanesque Iconography


This book was written in 1922 – the present work is translated from a revised
edition published in 1953. The date of writing is important; Mâle wrote three volumes on French religious art, the first, written in 1898 was on the thirteenth century, the period which at that time was seen as the climax and fulfillment of the then newly discovered Middle Ages, the second, published in 1908, was on the succeeding centuries. This book, the last of the trilogy, is the prelude, it deals with the period which leads up to the time 'where all is order and light', it is concerned with artists who did not copy nature, they stylized, 'they preferred the vagaries of the imagination to reality'. Today our taste and experience have changed; we are used to primitive art, to abstract art, to photography. Romanesque art is less strange, more sympathetic, we are less attuned to the great thirteenth century synthesis and its realism, more receptive to the questing experiments of the preceding century. And indeed, because he writes from the point of view of iconography and not of form, one has the impression that the author also was won over by the Romanesque artist.

Since 1922 the history of art has become an academic subject, and a great deal has been written about the twelfth century. Some of Mâle's conclusions have been rejected, others have been modified, many confirmed. Most obvious is his omission of the artistic achievements of the preceding centuries, for him monumental sculpture suddenly blossomed like a miracle in eleventh century France. It was undoubtedly a new flowering of an art which had been almost completely neglected since the Roman Empire, but it was also a change of emphasis. The troubled centuries in between had produced the great series of Roman mosaics, Insular and Carolingian manuscripts, the tenth century Anglo-Saxon and Ottonian revivals. The emphasis was on the inside of churches, the refulgence of glowing mosaic, reliquaries and textiles, church furnishing and Gospel books. Now the outside also is enriched, the church portal becomes immensely important.

We know hardly anything about the sculptors who created these portals. One or two signed their names but we do not know whether or not they were monks, probably not, but their work was done mainly for monastic churches, many belonging to monks of the Cluniac reform. Certainly Cluniac influence was dominant in the ideas which formed this sculpture, for the subjects were very probably prescribed in detail by the monastic patrons. One patron we do know about because he left a record of the work which he commissioned, was Suger, Abbot of St Denis. Unfortunately much of his work was destroyed — as was the great abbey church at Cluny — but Mâle devotes a whole chapter to his vital contribution, particularly his re-introduction of the patristic interpretation of the events of the Old Testament as prefigurations of the Incarnation.

Mâle's book is about iconography; that is, it is about the subjects of Romanesque art. More perhaps than with any other art this is its heart, the point where the artist began and the end which he sought to make manifest. The book is a magisterial survey of French monuments, including not only surviving monuments, but, where they exist, records of those which have
been destroyed; covering not only major works but many of the thousands of capitals. He has organized his material according to the sources from which he traces its inspiration; manuscript prototypes such as the Spanish manuscripts illustrating Beatus's Commentary on the Apocalypse, Hellenistic and Syrian paintings, and Oriental textiles; he goes on to chronicle the 'enrichment' of these sources through the themes of medieval liturgical drama, the legends of local saints, and the revived popularity of pilgrimage, to Santiago of Compostella, to Monte Sant'Angelo in Italy, to Rome. The pilgrimages created contacts between the churches and shrines along their route. Pilgrims were entertained on their way by jongleurs who retailed the new chansons de geste, often connected with their stopping place. All this provided stories and images for the sculptor. Male describes and discusses these images and identifies almost all the subjects. One group, the group unquestionably derived from the strange animals which the artists found on Oriental textiles, often used as wrappings for the bodies of the saints, he considers without symbolic significance. These are the images which St Bernard found so distracting and described so vividly 'those half men, those striped tigers, those fighting knights, those hunters winding their horns. Many bodies are seen there under one head, or again many heads to a single body . . . '. These sculptures (for instance one of the columns at Soulliac) do however embody some of the most significant characteristics of this art, in the elongation of forms and their intertwined relationship and above all in their movement, every form is alive, individual but inter-related.

These characteristics are apparent on the portals which are the great inventions of Romanesque art. They are extremely complex presentations of theological ideas. Male identified three types: the vision of St John in the Apocalypse, of which the finest example is the tympanum at Moissac, the Last Judgement, shown at Beaulieu, Conques and Autun, and the Ascension. In all, the central figure is the great image of Christ, transcending all other figures in stature and majesty, but surrounded by a great concourse of angels and apostles, saints and sinners, the space is packed with people, all, except the great Christ-figure, in movement. Finest of all is the portal at Vézelay. Male interprets this as the Descent of the Holy Ghost, but more recently it has been seen as a combination of the themes of the Commission to the apostles and the Ascension which immediately followed. Power streams down upon the apostles in visible rays from Christ's hands, below and around their agitated figures are the peoples of all nations, those to whom the message will be brought, who will be healed and redeemed, or who will reject it. Around the composition are representations of the signs of the Zodiac and of the Labours of the Months, symbolizing the pattern of our temporal life. It is 'the image of a theological mystery, a visible manifestation of an invisible reality'.
When knowledge is stored in images it can survive for a very long time, for stories are literally forms of cultural storage,' states William Thompson in his introductory essay to this cycle of poems. Within this multi-layered and elliptical narrative, the enigmatic figure of Quetzalcoatl shifts like his name - the Feathered Serpent. Dr Thompson has chosen to exposit the many-faceted god by the symbols of the bird and serpent, which together with the tree, he likens to the three brains of evolving creation, equating them with the action of the subtle bodies, of which Quetzalcoatl is master.

Few are aware of this gentle god of the Toltecs whose cult was subsumed in the Aztec civilization. His rites ended by becoming the bloodiest in world-history, culminating in the victim's heart being torn from his chest and held up to the sun. Dr Thompson sees the later Aztec practices as the perversion of an ancient practice: what had formerly been an opening of the heart-chakra to the spiritual sun, became a travesty, conforming to a fundamentalist literalism. But perhaps this is too simplistic a notion. The extremes and exigencies of Meso-America, of both land and peoples, created a culture which to this day remains savage and unpredictable. We should not expect its myths to be accessibly civilized according to our standards. It is evident that Quetzalcoatl is a sacrificial victim, with a cult that is concerned with sacrifice - not the symbolic offering of the mass in memory of a divine victim - but a sharing of the physical torments of the god for the good of the people.

When such a native cultus met the religion of the conquering Spaniards, inevitably the penitential excesses inherent within the culture were reinforced. The extremes of Latin mortification, themselves a partial legacy of the ecstatic mysteries of Dionysius and Cybele, grafted easily upon the native susceptibility. This remains true today when, in isolated regions, the solemn festivities of Holy Week are accompanied by the Way of the Cross which ends in an actual crucifixion of the man enacting Christ. Nor is there a shortage of volunteers. Identification with the victim is still strong, whether it be Christ or Quetzacoatl. The morbid penances of the sixteenth century native-born St Rose of Lima, who ruined her face by applications of excoriating herbs, make her close sister to Quetzalpetlatl, the god's own sister, who pierced her flesh with maguey thorns.

To understand Quetzalcoatl, we must see him in the context of his mythos. He remains a type of the Titanic stock which engodded Mexico; a deity of Promethean invention and selfless dedication to a people yet unborn; one who goes down among the deadlands to bring back the bones of the next generations which, Ezekiel-like, he causes to live; one who harrows hell in advance and whose personal sacrifice and mortification are all for his people.
Without this awareness it is easy to lose the real Quetzalcoatl, to mistake his enigmatic silence and enduring austerity, for weakness, just as the dynamic reality of Christ is often diluted to a 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' oleograph.

Dr Thompson has captured the epic proportions of this myth, wisely sacrificing a complex narrative in favour of a symbolic simplicity. The unobtrusive verse allows space for the scope of Quetzalcoatl's love, a love which is dumb and enduring and which finally offers up its heart. That heart is enshrined in heaven as the planet Venus, risen from the god's pyre of self-immolation like a phoenix from the ashes.

Caitlin Matthews

Three Notable Poets

Unity of the Stream, Vernon Watkins (Gomer Press & Yr Academi Cymraeg).
Voyages, George Mackay Brown (Chatto & Windus).
By the Fisheries, Jeremy Reed (Jonathan Cape).

Vernon Watkins' reputation has been to some extent overshadowed by that of his close friend and fellow-Welshman Dylan Thomas. This seems to have been due, less to any comparison of values, than to the impact of Dylan's public image, which took over increasingly as he grew older and finally destroyed him. Vernon Watkins, on the contrary, was a highly reserved man, who shunned notoriety and was quite capable of keeping a poem in store for five or six years before he felt it was ready for publication. Although he attained recognition at the end of his life (he died in 1967, at the age of sixty-one) and received plenty of public honours, he has remained largely a poet's poet.

This new selection has been compiled by his widow, with the various themes arranged according to a precise pattern. 'Each poem, each theme,' she explains in her short preface, 'should throw light on the following one.' The sequence contains one hitherto unpublished poem (Music of Colours) and reveals clearly that the underlying unity running through the stream of her husband's life was a constant preoccupation with the mystery of time. Each poem is concerned, directly or indirectly, with the struggle to break through the barriers of space-time and achieve at least a glimpse of what Watkins calls 'an Eden state of lasting time.'

This, of course, is nothing new. Paul Valéry once said that time is the essential theme of all the world's great novels, and the same is probably true of poetry, and perhaps of all art. However, the normal frontiers of human experience form not only a limitation, but also a safeguard. A break-through, as so many poets and artists have found to their cost, is not without its
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Dangers. Primitive literatures are full of warnings of what may happen when man — through his own daring or by mere chance — crashes through these barriers and finds himself plunged into chaos. Vernon Watkins had known in his youth the terrors of mental disorder, which throws our normal perception of time into confusion. When he wrote:

A secret law contrives
To give time symmetry
There is within our lives
An exact mystery

he was also describing his own quest for the defeat of death and decay through art and Christian insight.

Like his contemporaries Dylan Thomas and David Jones, Vernon Watkins spoke little Welsh, but came from a Welsh-speaking background. All three had been deeply influenced in childhood by the ancient legends preserved in the *Mabinogion* and believed that these stemmed from lost myths which might tell man a great deal about himself and his relationship to the world. The first branches of the collection tell of the adventures of Pwyll, Manawyddan, Math and other princes whose origins were obviously pre-Christian and perhaps even pre-Celtic. They belong rather to what Pierre Jakez Helias has called ‘an immense civilization which has created itself in the course of centuries out of its own imagination, while existing outside the shabby logic on which we nourish ourselves during our earthly passage.’ The stories reveal that this civilization was conscious of, and indeed largely obsessed by the problem of time. Their heroes climb a mound, or enter a castle, whereupon the natural laws of time and space cease to function, or the material world disintegrates, leaving them disorientated, lost in an alien dimension. Familiar time has been dissolved through magic into a chaos that is at once terrifying and fascinating. Nothing is ever explained. At this point, the stories stop short, as if confronted with some sacred taboo, then start off again, hours or years later, when the magic spell has dissolved.

*Unity of the Stream* contains a selection of important poems — published here together for the first time which throw new light on Watkins’ approach to this problem. They are centred on Taliesin, the sixth-century poet generally supposed to have given its present form to the *Mabinogion* and who has sometimes been identified with the prophet-magician Merlin. According to legend, Taliesin’s coracle was shipwrecked in a terrible storm and thrown up on Gower point, where Vernon Watkins had his home. One of the poems describes his arrival:

...Through darkness, trailing hands,
I drifted. Whale-gnarled images of gods
Floated upon the whale-backed water-plains.
I looked. Creation rose, upheld by Three.

In the next poem, Taliesin takes up his abode in a cave on the wild shore.
When he looks out from it, the surrounding world disappears, just as it did when Manawyddan came into his magic castle. Now, however, the transformation no longer reveals menacing chaos, but a new harmony. A verse in the poem entitled Taliesin and the Spring of Vision reads:

Earth’s shadow hung. Taliesin said: The penumbra of history is terrible.
Life changes, breaks, scatters. There is no sheet-anchor.
Time reigns; yet the kingdom of love is in every moment,
Whose citizens do not age in each other’s eyes.
In a time of darkness the pattern of life is restored
By men who make all transience seem an illusion
Through inward acts, acts corresponding to music.
Their works of love leave words that do not end in the heart.

Watkins was a deeply religious man who believed that the mystery of time could be at least partly solved in the light of Greek clarity and Christian order. For him, art was not an end in itself but an instrument of the ‘secret law’ of love, serving to reveal the divine symmetry of the whole world. ‘In true poetry,’ he wrote in a letter to Michael Hamburger, ‘metaphysical truth transfigures aesthetic ideas’. He believed that poetry can crystallize the moment when ‘time’s glass breaks and the world is transfigured in music,’ or when ‘Time is for us transfigured into colours.’ In the group of poems, printed together for the first time under the title The Music of Colours, each colour reveals its secret meaning. The non-colours – black and white – are equated with the mystery of birth and death:

White must be black, to be born white again
From the womb of sounds, the inscrutable grain,
From the crushed, dark fibre, breaking in pain . . .

Natural phenomena are transformed by the artist’s imagination. The foal which ‘slips from its mother to the boundless horizons of air’; swallows which ‘scintillate now in water, cut like a scythe through the grass’; sleeping or playing children, all become symbols of cosmic truth to be contemplated with the most extreme and loving attention. Watkins’ images are always created with rigorous precision, with the total respect due to the holiness of all creation.

The single meaning underlying the various themes in this selection is expressed and revealed through a considerable variety of forms. It is easy to detect what Vernon Watkins owed to Blake, Yeats and Hopkins, as well as to Greek, Latin, French and German verse. He did not, perhaps, develop a style as original as that of Dylan Thomas or David Jones, but an attentive ear will always detect the entirely personal music accompanying and underscoring the essential unity of his whole work.
No modern poet writing in English evokes so much in so few words as can George Mackay Brown. He was born, bred and remains faithful to the Orkney Islands, where people are not given to futile talk. His poetry is economical, sharp as ice and contains none of the chatter to be found here and there in even the greatest of post-seventeenth century verse. A press-ganged sailor-boy manages at last to send a letter to his parents, and there, in nine lines of only a few words each, is a whole story of adventure. In the sequence entitled *Christmas Patchwork*, some of the actors in the Christmas story – the three wise kings, Herod, a shepherd, a census official, a soldier – make brief appearances, say what is to be said about themselves and others, and disappear. The familiar events live again, belonging equally to Bethlehem and the Orkneys. In *Bedtime Story*, the narrator recounts, casually, as if seeking for his words:

There was this old Chinaman  
(Once on a star time)  
That king was yellow as a goldfish.  
He lived in a crystal palace.  
And one day came knocking on his door  
An Ebony king.  
And next day came knocking  
An Ivory king.  
The three kings kissed. They crossed.  
They saddled mules. Their faces flushed with sunset.  
And then –  
Wheest, the bairn’s asleep.

When George Mackay Brown writes of distant times and far-off places, he is still writing about today and the Orkneys. The snippets of gossip retailed in *Seal Island Anthology* still go on, surely, just as they do everywhere else, whatever changes North Sea oil may have brought about in the island’s geography. Snow, ice, thaw ‘like a filthy old tramp’, belong especially to the far North, but are also part of man’s wider heritage. The voyages of this poet are static, centred, so that the most distant experiences are drawn to a single spot, like pins hurrying to the pull of a magnet. The northern child in its cradle, the Jewish child in his manger are undivided. Between them, there exists neither space nor time. George Mackay Brown and Vernon Watkins are about as different as two poets can be, but both are striving to break through the barriers of space-time and both, at their finest moments, succeed.

Jeremy Reed is an extremely productive poet who seems to be constantly changing and developing in different directions. The poems in this new collection have varying themes and lead us into many different worlds, but most of them are concerned in some way with the sea and things happening or observed by the sea. Many of them have an intensely visual quality; words are used like colours on a painter’s palette. The poet sees ‘the window
catching crimson with the dawn / then mauvely erupting to cornflower blue';
the sea 'becomes clouded from manganese-blue to peach-grey'; when the
scene shifts to Greece in early Spring, Persephone wanders in fields where '... 
asphodels / and the mauve crocus were a coloured rain / entrancing her to 
stoop and white umbels / of hemlock caught the breeze ...' Colours, as in 
Impressionist painting, convey underlying moods.

Mostly though, we are on the uncertain English coast, where 'the Atlantic's 
bean-green's turbulent with pitched ground-swell'. The poet watches the sea 
and the sky, unknown holiday-makers and himself in various moods. All 
these are observed with an awareness which reaches far down and discovers 
secret forms of existence. Watching a conger-eel, he notes with a naturalist's 
precision what it looks like, where it lives and how it behaves, but also what it 
feels like to be a conger: 'A conger's world is tubular, it means / seeing things 
thinly through a gun-barrel.' A mullet's vision is different. it has it own 
rhythm, its special relationship to its environment. Of them he says: '... . 
Sometimes their slow / inquisitive brooding is like a cat's / translating 
everything to smell ...' Sometimes he turns the same almost clinical eye on 
himself and notes: 'A stoked temper's like a big cat in the blood'. Then 
remembered events are recalled: a chance meeting, for instance, the friend-
ship that ensues, an evening's drinking, then the sudden, meaningless quarrel 
and return at dawn to an empty room.

Jeremy Reed has added to these some themes suggested by his wide-
ranging reading. Some of these poems read a little like technical exercises, but 
in the one he entitles Christopher Smart in Madness, the suffering of poor Chris-
topher Smart, composing his Song to David among the horrors of an eighteenth 
century madhouse becomes a personal experience. Here misery brings a 
sense of unity 'with all hurt things'; pain and darkness are illuminated by 
sudden flashes of joy; help is at hand:

Outside it rains. I hear a horse collapse,
and men beat it ferociously with stocks.
It died. I pray God for redress
of all animal injuries tonight.
I wept and thought to incur a relapse,
and in his knowledge God brightened his light.
Tonight Christ's lantern swings inside this house.

Rilke once advised a young poet: 'Avoid grand subjects and make use of all 
that is offered you by everyday life. Express yourself through the things 
surrounding you, the images seen in your dreams and those you remember.' 
This advice has too often been interpreted as an excuse for flat statements of 
the kitchen-sink, one-o'clock-news variety. What Rilke surely meant was that 
even the simplest things have an inner meaning and that it is the poet's work 
to discover that meaning and give it form. Jeremy Reed is still young, but he 
has published a good deal during the last couple of years, always digging 
deeper to discover more about his subjects than their immediate appearance.
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He can already manipulate language with great skill and subtility, so that his images stand out sharp and clear to reveal life's hidden poetry.

It seems a pity that some of Jeremy Reed's best poems—'Shad Thames', 'Guardians', 'Dorothy Wordsworth', 'The Country through the Looking Glass' and others published in TEMENOS and elsewhere should not have been included here and that others (like 'Visiting Hours') should have been inexplicably curtailed.

Cecily Mackworth

Knowing One's Place

A Place on Earth (Revision), Wendell Berry, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1983. $15.
Standing by Words. (1983). These and other North Point Press publications by Wendell Berry are distributed in England by the Scholar Press.

'The earth is the genius of our life. The final questions and answers lie serenely coupled in it.' So speaks Mat Feltner, husband and farmer, a central figure in Wendell Berry's fine novel, first published in 1967, but extensively revised (chiefly by cutting, the author tells us in the Preface) for this new edition.

The time is early spring through late summer of 1945, the closing days of the Second World War, and the place is Port William, Kentucky, a small farming community on the Kentucky River. Most of the young men of the town are away in the war, some already dead and one, Mat's son Virgil, just reported as missing in action. Mat, his wife Margaret, and Virgil's wife Hannah, who is pregnant and living with them, must carry on in the face of this great uncertainty, not totally without hope ('he ain't dead'), but nonetheless hopeless, because nothing can be done. Nothing can be done, that is, except to continue living and working, inhabiting their place on earth.

Though he continues to hope with 'a hope more burdening than despair', Mat struggles to come to terms with his life and his relationship to his farm in the light of the possible, and, as the days stretch into weeks and months, probable, loss of his son. He recalls for Hannah his own memories, beginning with how Virgil had helped put a new roof on the barn, the first man's work he ever did:

'... I sent him over here with Ernest and they did it together. It would worry me to death trying to get any work out of him then, but he'd work for Ernest. I saw how that was and remembered how it was with me. Mighty hard to get a boy to come to it right under his daddy's hand. I don't know why.'

There are cows and calves scattered over the lot in front of the barn, others
lying down around the door and inside the driveway. These get up and move slowly out of the way as Mat and Hannah step up to the doorway and into it.

'Well,' Mat says, 'I do know why. By the time a boy gets big enough to work, his daddy's already been his boss for a long time, and not always an easy one. They've already pretty well tested each other, and know each other's weaknesses and flaws. There are a lot of old irritations all ready-made. And then a man teaching his own boy gets misled by pride. What he does wrong looks like your failure as much as it is his, and so you don't correct or punish for his sake, but yours. The way around it — or the way my daddy took with me and I took with Virgil — is to let him work with somebody older than he is, like Ernest, that you know he admires.'

And later, when Virgil had come home after college and told Mat that he wanted to stay there and farm with him:

'I'll never forget it. I'd have liked to just stop everything right there and celebrate. But I knew we'd only come to the beginning, and you don't celebrate at the beginning — even at the risk of never celebrating at all.'

Virgil, in his youthful enthusiasm and inexperience, had plowed his first field, on a hill top, too far over the brow of the hill:

'...I didn't say anything, hoping he'd have luck and get that mistake free. Thought I'd show him later what he'd done wrong, soon as I could do it without hurting his feelings.

'But there was an awful rain one night after his crop had been cut, I guess two weeks. I heard it begin and lay awake listening to it, knowing what was bound to be happening. And the next morning I said, "Let's go look at your crop." So we went, and walked all the way around it. It was hurt. Bound to have been. There's no way to plow sideling ground so it'll hold in a rain like that. "Virgil," I said, "this is your fault. This is one of your contributions to the world." That was hard for me to say. And he took it hard. I saw he was about to cry. And bad as I hated to do it, I let it work in him while we stood there and looked. I knew he was hating the day he ever thought of raising a crop, ready to give up. Finally I put my arm around him and I said, "Be sorry, but don't quit. What's asked of you now is to see what you've done, and learn better." And I told him that a man's life is always dealing with permanence — that the most dangerous kind of irresponsibility is to think of your doings as temporary. That, anyhow, is what I've tried to keep before myself. What you do on the earth, the earth makes permanent.'

Now Mat feels he owes an accounting to Virgil for the pain he caused, worried that his good intentions may not have been recognized.

'There's not any other life for me. That's why I wanted Virgil to have it, I reckon — I knew if he wanted it, it would be a good life for him. I'm not
saying it's not hard. But I can tell you that all of my life, in spite of the worst, I've been inspired by this place, and by what I foresaw or hoped I could do in it.'

Mat and his family cannot dwell on their grief however. With the spring come spring rains and a flood that ravages a neighbouring tenant farm and drowns the daughter of the farmer, who in his grief disappears, abandoning temporarily his wife and farm. Mat, accepting responsibility because he is the nearest kin of the drunken, incompetent landlord, and because he is a neighbour, hires his brother-in-law Ernest to repair the barn and helps with other neighbours to clean up the farm and prepare the fields for planing. And there are his own fields to prepare and animals to care for and Hannah's baby on the way. The Feltners are constantly called to involvement with life. With Virgil lost, Mat's plans for the land have changed, but his feeling for it has not:

This new work must be done for the sake of the land itself — and for the sake of no one he can foresee, someone who will come later, who will depend on what is done now.

So this is not a story of loss and emptiness; rather it is one of fulfillment, the fulfillment that comes from inhabiting one's proper place with all of its limitations and possibilities. Mr Berry is himself a countryman, living on and working a small hillside farm in Henry County, Kentucky, where his family has lived for several generations. His understanding of the land ('What I stand for is what I stand on,' he says in one of his poems) is that of a husbandman, in the fullest sense of the word. Thus marriage — standing by the given word and accepting limitations not of our own making — is a central theme in all his work; indeed one of his books of poems is titled The Country of Marriage. In his excellent collections of essays on agriculture and culture, A Continuous Harmony (1972), The Unsettling of America (1977), and The Gift of Good Land (1981), he argues that the crisis in modern agriculture has been caused by the demise of the small family farm: the farm family is increasingly divorced from the land, and the culture of agriculture is being lost. Mr Berry extends this analogy in his latest book of essays, Standing by Words (1983), to link poetry and marriage, affirming that balance, harmony, and coherence in life depends on 'words by which a man or woman can stand, words confirmable in acts.' And in A Place on Earth, Jayber Crow, the bald, bachelor barber and scholar, is being only a little whimsical when he imagines, in Port William, or beyond it or above it, 'a kind of Heavenly City, in which each house would be built in a marriage and around it, and all the houses would be bound together in friendships, and friendliness would move and join among them like an open street.'

Because Mr Berry's characters are real people — and real characters — the story of Port William is at once lifely serious and extremely funny. But the true central character is the web of life formed (farming, marriage, and writing are all in-forming acts) among man and woman; farmer, land, and livestock; family and community; human culture and nature. Wendell Berry knows his
place on earth and has enriched it, and us, by cultivating it with his imagination. Perhaps he himself best describes the importance of such acts of imagination in 'Notes: Unspecializing Poetry' in Standing by Words:

To preserve our places and to be at home in them, it is necessary to fill them with imagination. To imagine as well as see what is in them. Not to fill them with the junk of fantasy and unconsciousness, for that is no more than the industrial economy would do, but to see them first clearly with the eyes, and then to see them with the imagination in their sanctity, as belonging to the Creation.

To imagine the place as it is, and was, and – only then – as it will or may be. To imagine its human life only in harmony with its non-human life – as one, only one, of its possibilities. In that imagining, perhaps we may begin to see it in its sacredness, as unimaginable gift, as mystery – as it was, is, and ever shall be, world without end.

Will Marsh

Poetry and Public Life


Though many people today would recognize the political dimension of poetry, few would look for a poetic dimension in politics. The fourteen decades within which Spenser wrote The Faerie Queene and Pope The Rape of the Lock encompass also a period of national trauma by comparison with which our last century-and-a-half might be considered uneventful. Almost every certainty – cultural, political, scientific or theological – which existed in 1580 had, by the time of the Hanoverian accession, been over-turned not only in theory but in practice as well and if, after these years, Britain emerged as the military, economic and scientific leader of Western Europe, then the scars left upon our national culture were of a depth and permanence that the early eighteenth century chose, as far as possible, to forget. The period being, also, one of intense literary activity, it is hardly surprising that the poetry of the time should concern itself in large measure with the transformations which were the experience of its authors. What is, perhaps, more surprising is that the poetic argument should so consistently be conducted in terms of the Mercurian attributes of sovereignty or their manifold mythological analogues.

Such, however, is the insight presented with formidable scholarship and considerable elegance by Dr Brooks-Davies. That Spenser's Faerie Queene was politically loaded (if not politically inspired, as Dr Brooks-Davies would have it; nothing in the book convinces one that the inspiration of the poem is
poetic) has always been well-known; Spenser was himself anxious that it should be read in this light. In this study, however, it is shown beyond reasonable doubt that Spenser's intention was not merely to flatter his sovereign, to endorse the legitimacy of the Tudor dynasty or the purification of religious doctrine but, more significantly, to establish an identity between good, legitimate and reforming monarchs in general and a cluster of ideas of which the Mercurian cult was the Classical expression.

As intermediary between Heaven and Earth, bringer of health, justice, wisdom and revelation, emblematic both of the active and the contemplative life, linked already with Venus in Classical mythology, with Spring and regeneration, the figure of Mercury provided for a Renaissance poet a convincing metaphor for the ideal of an absolute, female and virgin monarch. In the Faerie Queene, however, Spenser takes this only as his starting-point; the poem, in Dr Brooks-Davies' reading, is constructed in the form of a theme and variations in which the central Mercurian myth, through a series of subtle and complex transformations, serves as the catalyst for the poetic fusion of all that which, in the Renaissance, constituted 'knowledge'. Historical or linguistic coincidence (Arcturus, constellation of the Bear = Arthur, paradigm of British kings – Isis, river tributary of the Thames = Isis, Egyptian Goddess of mysteries), emblematic analogy (Caduceus, rod with entwined serpents, = magical rod of Moses commanding serpents = Virgilian Golden Bough, royal sceptre, shepherd's crook, etc.) or structural correspondence (alchemical King and Queen, gold / silver, red / white, York / Lancaster: putrefaction / regeneration, benign / retrograde aspects in astrology, natural / demonic magic, etc.) are among the devices by which Spenser effects the poetic unification of political, geographical, Hermetic, alchemical, astrological, Hebrew, Classical, Christian, Arthurian, Druidic or Egyptian systems of thought.

As crucial in the Faerie Queene as its Mercurian theme is that of corruption and regeneration whose mythological formulation Spenser borrowed from Giordano Bruno and his Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast (dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney). This was, in turn, founded in the Hermetic tradition and, in particular, the Asclepian Lament on the demise of true religion in Egypt (to be restored with the re-animation of statues). The very name of Hermes Trismegistus was sufficient, in Renaissance terms, to bind this supposedly ancient Authority to that of his Greek namesake and if Egypt was, in Spenser's work, partly to be read as the analogue of Britain, then the identification of Druidism with the ancient 'true religion' was a necessary consequence. Here, again, Dr Brooks-Davies un-ravels the mythological content of Spenser's work at a structural level and in doing so reveals the scale of his achievement.

More than to any other Elizabethan writer, it would seem that it was to Spenser and his subtly constructed mythological system that poets returned during the seventeenth century for a language in which to urge or to refute the authority, the legitimacy or the theological necessity of the House of Stuart. The masques performed at the courts of Elizabeth, James I and Charles I had their roots as, in a sense, the Faerie Queene did, in mediaeval
pageants whose function had been, through allegory and mythological reference, to welcome, to celebrate as well as to advise or warn rulers as they made their way through cities under their dominion. Though, in these works of uneven literary quality, Dr Brooks-Davies does not discover a seriousness of intent comparable with that of Spenser but, more often, a sycophantic trivialization of mythological themes which parallels at times the packaging of our own rulers by the myth-makers of Madison Avenue, they remain a valuable testimony to the view among contemporary poets as to what sort of monarch would be worthy to rule by Divine Right, to defend the Faith and bring perpetual Spring to our Land.

It was, perhaps, for this reason that Roundhead writers such as Marvell and Milton were able, while holding an opposite opinion on the issue of Stuart rule by Divine Right, to couch their alternative aspirations still in terms of the Spenserian paradigm. Dr Brooks-Davies shows convincingly that, while the Arthurian and Druidic themes may receive greater emphasis, while the contemplative mode is more prominently stated and while the historical reality of the present is no longer presented as corroboration of other available knowledge, such poems as On Appleton House, L'Allegro, Il Penseroso and Lycidas continue, nevertheless, to develop the basic thematic of the Asclepian Lament and the hoped-for restoration of True Religion essentially in the terms which Spenser had established.

Finally, in The Rape of the Lock, Dr Brooks-Davies is able to demonstrate that an apparently flippant social satire conceals Pope's nostalgia for a disappearing world in which political reality was, at least, intended to correspond to a coherent mythological order even though, to him, the political price for its return might no longer be acceptable.

Implicit in much of this study is another issue of at least comparable interest to that of the collapse of the magical notion of monarchy; this is the status of poetry itself and the public role of the poet. If Arthur's dependence on Merlin was established in legend then Elizabeth herself echoed this in her adoption of John Dee as attendant Magus and made a living demonstration of reciprocal needs and obligations. In Book VI of The Faerie Queene, Spenser appears to suggest that the poet carries an analogous duty and the work itself should be seen as fulfilling an essentially public function in making sense of the world as Spenser's contemporaries knew it. Not only the intellectual arrogance but, more important, the political decline of monarchic power, the rise of positivist or scientific thought and a growing public reluctance to confront polemically problematic issues left poetry increasingly on the margin of public life as the eighteenth century approached. What Milton could still see as emancipation in a world of renewed intellectual enterprise, Pope identified, at the dawn of the Enlightenment, as the relegation of poetry to the status of entertainment. As Dr Brooks-Davies points out, Dryden's re-working of The Tempest portrays Ariel and Prospero as living in different worlds, no longer mutually dependent.

This is a book which it is hard to imagine being written or understood (at
least, in English) before the time when Edgar Wind, in studies such as Bellini's *Feast of the Gods*, had opened the discussion of fine art to a more than purely aesthetic or synchronic methodology, or when Frances Yates had placed the intellectual life of Elizabethan England in the mainstream of Renaissance culture. In bringing to bear on the study of literature these and other disciplines whose origins lie outside conventional literary discourse, it is a work whose interest goes beyond the modesty of its immediate intention.

*James Madge*

**A Great Platonist**


The title and contents of this, the first volume of Edgar Wind's collected essays, fall like manna on a barren land.

The world of art historians at present encourages a curious language tailored for the computer, word-processing age. It is possible to refer to the accounts of the Sistine Chapel without ever discussing its iconology, we collect facts like an ever-extending jigsaw puzzle to which the master image is lost, Courbet's revolutionary imagery is interpreted whilst we are advised to refrain from looking at the art of Michelangelo or Blake in the light of Neoplatonic thought. It is disturbing to find how many enemies Plato and his friends have gained over recent years.

It is, therefore, a joy to welcome this most worthy initiative undertaken by Oxford University Press to publish all Edgar Wind's papers and essays. Furthermore, the editor, Dr Janie Anderson, intends to gather together Wind's writings on Michelangelo, in order to 'complete' his unfinished *The Theological Sources of Michelangelo* for publication. The project is exciting, encouraging the search for tracing the links of the golden chain to be found in the Western Tradition.

This first volume consists of an informative memoir and twelve studies of varying length. Fundamental is Wind's early essay on Plato's philosophy of art. It is a remarkable contribution which eases those problems many have felt with the philosopher's treatment of the poet. The concept of the soul as portrayed in the *Phaedrus* (the chariot drawn by two horses) is contrasted with the imagery of the puppet to be found in *Laws*. Clearly, Heindrich von Kleist's essay on the marionette theatre is a beautiful meditation on Plato's imagery. Among many wires, the puppet has only one which is unchanging - it is gold, flexible yet harmonious. However, the soul is incapable of responding to it unless some of the other wires are so placed as to pull in the same direction as
the golden cord. The secret is the mastery of pleasure and pain through
'divine fear', awe of the misterium tremendum et fascinans. This sense of awe alone
may rightly order and control the 'divine frenzy' known in wine, song, dance,
and the intoxication of true creativity. Ignorance imprisons a life in the
clutches of discord — a ridiculous condition which only a fool believes he can
endure.

This discord — and here we come to the crucial point — must ensue when
the arts free themselves from the constraints of the state and proceed of
their own accord to set up pleasure and pain as the final arbiters. For the
charms the arts work upon the senses are manifold, the variety of forms
they can reflect is infinite, and the soul which surrenders itself to them,
instead of seeking support in the one truth and the one virtue, becomes
shapeless and soft, and loses all sense of good and evil. For Plato art is a
kind of magic. It permeates man and can transform him. That is why the
state must use it as a means of shaping the soul. But it must also supervize
it. For the same power which serves the state when controlled by it will, if
it is not curbed, turn against the state and against the unity of man. This is
why Plato fights not only against the release of art from its legal ties with
the state, but also against the separation of the arts from one another,
against the creation of a kind of music which has no connection with the
word and of a poetry not accompanied by music, against all artistry which
appeals to a part of man as though it were the whole, and so upsets the
equilibrium of the human mind.

Hence Plato's wariness of the man with the skill 'to assume all shapes and
imitate all things', for too easily will he show himself off to the detriment of
the whole. He was aware of the changes taking place in Greek cultural life —
drama abandoning its link with cult, sculpture changing from the Phidian style
to the softer forms of Praxiteles, vase painting losing linear contours for
polychrome effects. Right art could strengthen the Intellect whereas wrong art
weakened, fragmented, due to the webs and illusions of sensual indulgence.
Hence, the philosopher's hostility to mimesis.

What seems to Plato to be really dangerous about artistic creation and
enjoyment, what makes it the antithesis of philosophical reflection, is the
suppression of self-consciousness in the action of the moment, the
complete identification with what is depicted. That is why, in making the
value of an action depend on whether it is guided by the Idea (that is, by
philosophical awareness), he condemns mimesis as the source of all that
is worthless. But that does not prevent him from praising it as a means of
preparing for future education, at the stage when reflection has not yet
begun, that is to say, as a means of influencing the very young; always
with the proviso that it must not be left uncontrolled.

The whole section reads like a cautionary tale to the swings of the pendulum
experienced in Western art since the Renaissance; surely it unmask the visual
world of the television-video world which now surrounds us from school to pension!

This remarkable essay continues with a discussion on Lessing, Kant, Schiller, Goethe, Schegel, Baudelaire, Wilde and Proust in the light of Plato's thought.

The second essay expresses the importance of Warburg's view of art in contrast to Wölfflin's — that is, that 'the eloquence of symbols' penetrates to the heart of the matter, whereas Wölfflin's 'principles' consciously keep the onlooker on the surface of things. The frescoes of Palazzo Schifanoia may indeed visually fascinate, but interpreted they teach, illuminate and lead to an understanding of the thought of a vital period in history.

The other essays reflect upon aspects of Donatello, Botticelli, Origen, Raphael, Grunewald, Erasmus, Democritus in Christian thought, and Ficino's reading of Laws IV concerning 'fortuna'. The book concludes the contrast between traditional religion and modern art, with special emphasis given to Rouault and Matisse. There is a final envoi, entitled 'Yeats and Raphael: The dead child on a dolphin' — a gem of no more than two pages. It is a perfect example of the knowledge and insight incapable of fitting into processors, catalogues or computers, the 'Platonic lie' as it has been described to the writer! Wind, with amazing economy, shows how the understanding of Platonism's golden cord across the ages may link, through the poetic genius, Ancient Greece, the Renaissance and the present, and continue to live in our consciousness.

John Allitt

Homer's Dreams


The problems involved in translating any work from one language to another are considerable — nowhere more so than where the work is cast in a poetic form. When the original is one of the great cornerstones of literature, the task is even more daunting. When, in 1959, Christopher Logue began to make a version of Book 16 of the Iliad, his task was made less easy by a scant knowledge of Greek. He was forced to depend on the help and advice of others, as well as the work of previous translators: Pope, Lord Derby, Murray, and Rieu. That he absorbed the best from these while eschewing their unhappier excesses, is to his credit, as is his decision to make 'an account' of Homer's epic, rather than a direct translation. From this point he either adds to or cuts ruthlessly, according to where fancy — or the muse — leads. The
result is a kind of Homeric dream: terse, powerful, idiomatic. The original, sometimes prolix form is carved to the bone; and suffers little from the surgery. The laconic qualities of Homer's heroes blossom under such treatment, and the narrative drive simply hurls one along with it. The passage describing the slaying of Patroclus by Apollo, which in the original takes some 150 lines, is, in Logue's version, reduced to:

His hand came from the East,
And in His wrist lay all eternity;
And every atom of His mythic weight
Was poised between His fist and bent left leg. (p.38)

This is not Homer, of course; but it is good writing; and it conveys the quality of the Homeric style in a way that direct translation could scarcely better. Logue's Homeric dream draws its energy from the original but is fuelled by a totally contemporary awareness. The approach to the subject of war reminds one at times of David Jones' In Parenthesis, where the poet struggles always to reach an understanding of 'the evil that men do', and does so in the quiet moments found amid every battle, no matter how bloody. In this way evil is transformed through art: pity and sorrow espoused. Even Achilles, that most warlike of heroes, has such moments, as when he wakes from sleep, having briefly forgotten the death of Patroclus, only to find that

Those who have slept with sorrow in their hearts
Know all too well how short but sweet
The instant of their coming-to can be:
The heart is strong, as if it never sorrowed;
The mind's dear clarity intact; and then,
The vast, unhappy stone from yesterday
Rolls down these vital units to the bottom of oneself. (p.79)

Fine and moving stuff. If Mr Logue never writes anything else as good, he deserves to be remembered for this alchemical transformation of a great work into a fresh and original mould.

John Matthews

Shakespeare and Sacred Art


This book is a revised and slightly expanded version of the author's earlier book Shakespeare in the Light of Sacred Art published in 1966. That book, coming as something of a revelation to many readers of the plays, now reissued with its
new title, referring as it does to the enigma of the dramatist's greatness both as an artist and as a man, is to be much welcomed.

The author's thesis has its starting point in the fact of the total impact that each of Shakespeare's best plays makes upon us when we attend their performance. In order to do justice to an explanation of the depth and nature of this impact, to try and account for it, the author discusses ten of the late plays from Henry IV to The Tempest against the background of the intellectual principles of sacred art. This, his argument implies, is the only context that will yield adequate criteria to enable us to judge the greatness of the specific genius of Shakespeare's art. For such principles, when operative, presuppose our seeing this world as a shadow or symbol of the next and our seeing man as the shadow or symbol of God. In such a context 'all earthly things can only be referred back to their spiritual archetypes through the faculty of intellectual perception, the insight which pierces through the symbol to the universal reality that lies beyond it' (p.12). This is not to say that a case is made here for Shakespeare's plays being sacred art in the full and central sense, but that so often in these plays 'Shakespeare is concentrating on the most universal aspect of religion. He is concerned with man's having the right attitude of soul towards providence' (p.18). Moreover, Dr Lings claims, it is obvious that the plays far transcend the exoteric level at which salvation is at best no more than a remote ideal, and move on towards the esoteric level at which the process of sanctification begins. And this suggests that Shakespeare was actively following a spiritual path.

It is, after all, in these later plays that Shakespeare, from being in earnest, 'came to be in very deadly earnest' (p.15). From the earliest works we witness the theme of the necessity of the perfecting and resurrection of the soul, its purity and union with the Divine after trial and purification. But in these later works 'it was as if Shakespeare had suddenly come to grips with the Universe after having contemplated it for some time with half-detached serenity' (p.15). Thus the universality of this contemplative view justifies the author's examination of these plays in the light of the principles and criteria of the Christian Middle Ages rather than in the context of Renaissance humanism in which earthly objects are considered entirely 'for their own sakes as if nothing lay behind them' (p.12). As a consequence of this inversion of the spiritual values of the earlier age it comes about that God is conceived in the image of Man. We recall, for instance, the use of Gods and Heroes in early opera as a vehicle for expressing merely human emotions.

Again, this is not to say that the author extrapolates the meaning of Shakespeare's dramas from the context and substance of medieval art. He is well aware that Shakespeare spans two ages, with a foot in both. Outwardly, he is a man of the Renaissance in his understanding of the worldly aspects of the individual characters that people his plays, often in pre-Christian settings. But inwardly Shakespeare's vision is more akin to the spiritual ideals of the Middle Ages with its central concern for the question of human salvation and sanctification of the individual Soul; always remembering, of course, that
within the transition of the Elizabethan and Tudor Ages such categories could not be absolute. Dr Lings suggests that in more than one play the medieval and renaissance views meet as on a battlefield (p.45). Yet, as he argues, the last plays are in general more medieval in their admission of Divine Powers and the relative absence of psychological detail in their characters.

The author's method could hardly be simpler. There are some scholars, chief among which in recent years must be Frances Yates, who, by bringing new material to the plays from beyond the texts themselves, illuminate our understanding afresh. But Dr Lings' method is to deduce nothing about the plays that cannot be gathered from the text. Indeed, the illumination is from within the text. His is the greater achievement perhaps, for it enables the reader to feel a profound intuitive empathy with each of the dramas as if his own soul were caught up in the action and is thus, in some sense, dependent upon its outcome.

Given the bias of our time, one in which scholarly and critical commentary places the highest value upon knowledge derived from historical context and aesthetic judgement it is instructive to compare T. S. Eliot's famous essay on _Hamlet_ with Dr Lings reading of the same play. Eliot, working within the confines of 'relevant historical facts' for the purpose of interpreting the intractible material that is _Hamlet_, concluded that it was an 'artistic failure'. This failure was largely due, he thought, to Hamlet's inability to find an objective equivalent for his feelings. With the benefit of Dr Lings' reading it is easy to see that Eliot's discontent with the drama has everything to do with his reluctance to view the drama from any other point of view than that of Hamlet's psychology. Dr Lings, on the other hand, sees the 'revenge' motif of the drama as one of cosmic proportion, nothing less than to effect a complete reversal of the state of affairs which caused the Fall (p.28). By distancing himself from the character of Hamlet in this way Dr Lings is able to interpret the overall pattern as well as a good deal of the 'minute particulars' of the text in a thoroughly plausible manner, in which individual psychology has small relevance. On this reading, Hamlet and his mother together constitute the fallen human soul, 'Hamlet himself being the personification of its active aspect – its conscience and its intelligence' (p.28). Thus Hamlet's revenge is against the Devil no less and must, accordingly, be absolute. The hesitation and procrastination of his seemingly irresolute nature are seen here as a series of manoeuvres aimed at overcoming the 'indifferent honest' human state by means of spiritual purification. It is the anticipated rebirth of Hamlet in the afterworld at the very end of the play that allows us to see that the action of _Hamlet_ corresponds to the sanctifying movement of Dante's _Inferno – Purgatorio – Paradiso_. The 'problems' of _Hamlet_ that so troubled Eliot are here dissolved like mist before the midday sun. Indeed, they are demonstrated, by implication, to be the problems inherent in Eliot's viewpoint.

The necessity of having to move beyond the confines of the world of time and space, of historical event and the relativities of artistic achievement and personal psychology, and to view the greatness of Shakespeare's art from the
perspective of the principles and symbolism of sacred art—a perspective that is alone commensurate with that greatness, one might add—and the interpretative riches that such a perspective yields becomes cumulatively apparent through each of the book's chapters. Thus Othello is interpreted in the light of the primordial symbol of the union of lovers in marriage, a union that recapitulates on the human plane the union of the soul (Othello) with the spirit (Desdemona) with Iago as the devil who attempts to frustrate the union. Measure for Measure is seen in terms of three souls, Angelo, Isabella and Claudio in search of perfection and completeness with the aid of the Duke 'who personifies the transcendence of the claims of the next world over this world and whose presence in this world is, to use Angelo's words, like power Divine' (p.56). Macbeth is discussed in terms of its being a morality play whose macrocosmic significance is 'more real than life' in that it reveals the 'basic skeleton of reality which 'ordinary life' tends to hide' (p.61) by way of a searing examination of man's fallen nature. And so on through each of the plays.

In his interpretations Dr Lings never succumbs to the temptation to over comment or explain. Yet his reading of each play, necessarily sketched with a broad brush, nonetheless delineates the interior and deepest meaning at the heart of what we are never allowed to forget is, after all, stage drama. Each of these broad readings leaves the reader free to add according to need as much corroborative detail from the text as he thinks fit.

The 'secret' then, referred to in the title of this book is none other than Shakespeare's ability, in the maturer plays, and in virtue of his possession of what Blake called Divine Vision, to make us 'take upon ourselves the mystery of things' (p.138). This is not merely a question of the power of language or the depth from which such plays may evoke extremes of feeling in us. Rather it has to do with the intrinsic power of Shakespeare's art to make us 'participate naturally and almost involuntarily in the world of holiness' (p.138). In the beauty of these plays we accept in an inexplicable way that the pattern they are making is in harmony with the greater tapestry of life. The secret is that Shakespeare starts off on the 'right' side of the pattern, in contrast to our habitual presence in everyday life on the 'wrong' side, and he somehow manages, while the spell of the drama lasts, to draw us momentarily through to the side from which the pattern itself is woven by Divine Forces.

Against the background of the author's radical critique of the accepted view of the greatness of Renaissance art his approach to these plays poses a number of interesting questions. One of them is this. At a time when much academic criticism and commentary seems to operate according to a law of diminishing returns leaving us with more and more knowledge of less and less as the great art of the past is reduced to so much cultural fodder, on what basis can we adequately approach an artist of Shakespeare's stature? This book is Dr Lings answer to that question: it is by way of those intellectual and metaphysical principles by which such art is forever contemporaneous in the sense that its interior and cosmic meaning makes accessible the path of our spiritual
destiny. Any art that fails to do this because, for whatever reason, it opts out of facing up to the possibility of a human perfection is more or less by definition a lesser thing. Man, as Shakespeare, early and late, reminds us, is only measured by what is greater than man:

Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. Our bodies are our gardens to the which our wills are gardeners. . . . If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most preposterous conclusions; but we have reason to cool our raging motions, our carnal strings, our unbitted lusts.

(Othello 1:3)
Notes on Contributors

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Michael Stancliffe, Dean of Winchester, has studied the works of David Jones for many years. His interest in the visual and other arts has led to his commissioning (amongst other things) sixteen banners by Thetis Blacker in Batik painting illustrating Genesis and the Apocalypse.
TEMENOS has from its inception set out to call in question the failed and sterile premises of contemporary culture in the field of the arts. We have made it our purpose to challenge current fashions and opinions which are the expression of materialism — in whatever guise — in the name of those permanent values which have always informed life and art alike during periods in which humanity has been willing to reach beyond merely mundane concerns. We are now witnessing the first attempt at a purely secular culture, and this has clearly failed to provide for the real needs of the human spirit. Far from accepting the inevitable sterility of this state of affairs we hold that by attempting continuously to re-orient the arts towards the enduring spiritual source of our enlightenment, we can in some measure restore our proper human kingdom.

We have now reached our fifth issue and no less than in previous issues TEMENOS 5 attempts both to state principles and to present contemporary examples of work in which some vision of the sacred, its values and its qualities, are embodied or implicit. The fact that TEMENOS has become internationally recognized as a focal point, and has attracted such diverse and rich material from many countries sufficiently demonstrates the validity of our belief.

Even at a time when so many circumstances militate against the arts' giving imaginative expression to the sense of the sacred, each issue of TEMENOS has given ample evidence that now, as in any other time or place, the well-springs of Imagination can still be found, for they remain in the unchanging nature of things. Encouraged by this evidence it is our hope that TEMENOS will continue to play its part in bringing about a re-appraisal and, indeed, a reversal of the impoverished, reductionist views of humanity now so uniformly imposed upon us by the manipulators of taste and opinion. We cannot fail, if only because 'there is nothing higher than the truth' — that same truth which has for the majority of mankind in past ages been the measure of wisdom; that measure has not been found wanting.