

# TEMENOS



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John Lane, Jan le Witt, Michael Loewe, Rayne Mackinnon, David MacLagan,  
Jean MacVean, Jean Mambrino, John Matthews, Basarab Nicolescu, Peter Pelz,  
Kathleen Raine, Jeremy Reed, Roberto Sanesi, Tom Scott, Liadain Sherrard,  
Östen Sjöstrand, Philip Sherrard, Andrei Tarkovsky, Peter Lamborn Wilson,  
Andrew Staniland, E. W. F. Tomlin, Vernon Watkins, V. S. Yanovsky

# 8

A REVIEW DEVOTED TO THE ARTS OF THE IMAGINATION





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Temenos London  
47 Paultons Square  
London SW3 5DT

*Publishing Office*  
47 Paultons Square  
London SW3 5DT

*Distribution*  
Element Books Ltd  
Longmead Industrial Estate  
Shaftesbury, Dorset SP7 8LP  
Telephone Shaftesbury (0747) 51339

*North America*  
Phanes Press  
P.O. Box 6114, Grand Rapids  
Michigan 49516

The Lindisfarne Press  
RD2, West Stockbridge  
Massachusetts 01266

*Australia*  
Astam Books Pty Ltd  
250 Abercrombie Street  
Chippendale  
N.S.W. 2008

Quest Book Agency  
121 Walker Street  
North Sydney  
N.S.W. 2060

*India*  
Heritage Publishers  
4C Ansari Road  
Daryaganj  
New Delhi 110002

*France*  
Calignani  
224 Rue de Rivoli  
75001 Paris

All manuscripts, correspondence and books for review should be addressed to the editorial office. Provision for return postage should accompany all manuscripts which will not otherwise be returned.

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## Acknowledgments

First we wish to thank all those generous friends who at the end of the First Temenos Conference at Dartington Hall in November 1986 contributed subscriptions and donations to Temenos.

Transparencies of the colour-plates of Winifred Nicholson's painting, and photographs of abstract works, were lent to Temenos by Jake, Kate and Andrew Nicholson, whom we thank for permission to reproduce them. 'Nursery Bunch' (plate 1), 'Allwoodii Pinks' (plate 2), and 'Flowers in pots, Dulwich' (plate 4) are from the collection at the Elmhurst Centre, Dartington Hall, 'Narcissi and Bluebells' are from the Kettle's Yard collection and 'Greek Gold' from the collection of Kate Nicholson, all of whom we also thank. 'Acidanthera', 'Snowdrop and Wintersweet' and 'First Prismatic' belong to Kathleen Raine.

There will be a retrospective exhibition of the paintings of Winifred Nicholson, at the Tate Gallery from 2nd June to 3rd August, 1987. The Arts Council has organised a tour of this exhibition to the following Art Galleries:

15 August 1987 – 20 September 1987

Newcastle Laing Art Gallery

26 September 1987 – 1 November 1987

Bristol City Art Gallery

7 November 1987 – 13th December 1987

Stoke City Art Gallery

13 February 1988 – 20 March 1988

Cambridge Kettle's Yard

Cards of all the paintings by Winifred Nicholson reproduced in this issue of Temenos are available for sale at 50p each, £3.50 for the set, plus 50p packing and postage. Please order from the editorial address, 47 Paultons Square, London SW3 5DT.

Our cover design 'Phoenix Egg' is specially designed for Temenos by Thetis Blacker.

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Text © Temenos London 1987 Cover Motif © Thetis Blacker 1985

British Library CIP Data

Temenos 8

1. Arts-Periodicals

ISSN 0262-4524

Printed in Great Britain

Typesetting in Joanna by Nene Phototypesetters, Northampton

Colour plates by Skelton's Press, Wellingborough

Produced by the September Press, Wellingborough

## Editorial Note

The First *Temenos* Conference was held at Dartington Hall, in Devon, from 13th–16th November 1986. One hundred and fifty or more attended as residents or full-time non-residents, and many more were present for single days or single papers. In what the ‘success’ of such a gathering consists it is hard to say; but many felt that, in Wendell Berry’s words, ‘something happened’. Many of those attending were past or future contributors to *Temenos*; others, readers; and another large group consisted of readers of *Resurgence*, whose editor, Satish Kumar, was one of our speakers. Some who attended came from Australia, India, Spain, Argentina, France, Ireland, Canada and the United States; and from the many letters since received it is clear that links were made, some likely to be fruitful in future work, others in future friendship or correspondence. The conference was felt to be all too short, with not enough leisure for conversation and enjoying the beautiful surroundings of Dartington Hall – a lack we will try to remedy next time (if there is a next time) perhaps in 1988, since the organization and work involved is more than can be undertaken every year.

Not all the papers read will be published. Dr Martin Lings showed us slides of Korans, of great beauty, to appear in a forthcoming book to be published by the Islamic Texts Society. Joscelyn Godwin made us sing for the (in musical terms) unusually long time of ten minutes, each our single note in the harmony of the universe; an experience of great power but impossible either to describe or to reproduce. Dr S. H. Nasr’s distinguished paper on ‘Man and the Sacred’ was delivered extempore and lost as a result of an electrical failure. Dr Santosh Pall’s paper on ‘Yeats and India’ is to be expanded into a book on that theme. Some of the papers will, however, appear in *Temenos* 9, others (including Wendell Berry’s outstanding paper on ‘Preserving Wilderness’ and Satish Kumar on ‘Healing the Earth’) will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Resurgence*, which will also be printing John Lane on ‘Sacred Painting’, a paper much appreciated in particular by the painters present and confronting the problems of the present-day artist.

In *Temenos* 9 we intend to include Philip Sherrard on ‘Presuppositions of the Sacred’, Brian Keeble on ‘Work and the Sacred’, Kathleen Raine

on 'Nature, House of the Soul' and Keith Critchlow on 'the Number Nineteen'. Christopher Bamford's paper on 'The Living Word' may be held over. The fine exhibition of works by past or future contributors to *Temenos* in the Dartington Art Gallery hung for a month and was well attended, but these paintings will not be reproduced as such. Neither will the poems read at the evening of poetry-reading by *Temenos* contributors.

Publication cannot, in any case capture a certain atmosphere, a note struck from the first sound of Yoshikazu Iwamoto's bamboo flute on the first evening, to the last silence following the singing summoned forth by Joscelyn Godwin, a second time (by eager request) before we went our ways.

The present-day 'scene' in the arts is very dark, characterised as it is by either triviality or corruption, and very often the two in combination. All must play our part in challenging and reversing this downward trend which bids fair to destroy altogether the values upon which civilisations – not excepting our own – have ever been built. There is simply no point in calculating the chances of success or failure, for neither the one nor the other can be either permanent or certain. And if failure were certain and today the last day of the world, truth and beauty would still be themselves and our task to affirm the one and create the other.

*Temenos* wishes to thank Dartington Hall, especially John Lane who proposed and inspired this occasion, also Sue Kellam whose work and organisation we all appreciate; as we do that of the kitchen and domestic staff of the Elmhirst centre for all they did to make our conference a celebration.

Finally we wish to thank all those who so generously subscribed in order to receive the next three issues of *Temenos* at reduced rates; and to those who gave larger sums to enable us to meet the expenses of our continuance. This support, both practical and moral, enables us to go on with renewed confidence. The sum so far received is well over £2000.

Kathleen Raine



## Andrei Tarkovsky

*It is our privilege to publish in Temenos a contribution from Andrei Tarkovsky, whose early death takes from our world an outstanding genius of the spirit, who, moreover, is a voice heard throughout the world, for he speaks to us all, and in a medium – the film – which reaches multitudes. This we owe to St James's, Piccadilly, and to Peter Pelz, who in 1984 invited Tarkovsky to participate in their First Major Festival. On January 30th, 1987, a memorial service was held in St James's, attended by the great film-maker's widow and son, and a multitude of his admirers who filled the Church. We publish below an English translation of Tarkovsky's lecture in 1984, to which Peter Pelz's address given at the memorial service serves as the best possible introduction.*

When I invited Andrei Tarkovsky to our Festival in 1984 he was for me quite simply the greatest living artist. That he chose film-making was coincidental. He was a visual artist, thinker, dreamer, playwright, and above all a poet. None I knew remotely approached him as a creator. The substance of his art embraced an understanding of the world, political, social and historical which can only be described as prophetic. He had ingested the major events of our century and soaked himself in the culture of our civilisation. This knowledge gave every frame of his films a resonance that I know of in no other artist. Over and above this he was a visionary. Tarkovsky belongs to that rare and golden tradition that began with the Old Testament prophets, reaching a peak with the inspired John of the Book of Revelation and has continued haltingly and with increasing difficulty throughout the ages. William Blake, whom we celebrate here at St James's, was one. For me Tarkovsky was our contemporary prophet and visionary, whose films speak with elemental tongues. And blood; because there was yet another quality which made his films unique. It was his readiness to lay himself open, to be constantly questioning and probing the human confusion of his own life. This particularly rare quality gives a raw confessional edge to the films, an invitation for us to be equally open. The 'so called' difficulty of his films lies in this challenge. It was one of his great insights that we can only truly understand and thereby bring about a change in life by the involvement of our emotional and

intuitive responses. For our rational and materialistic age this is exceptionally hard to do. Children have no difficulty here. I watched *Ivan's Childhood* with a group of children I was teaching, when the film first appeared. Their response was total. Despite the language barrier and the difference of background, they identified with the boy. Not only that, the following days were spent exploring and learning the history that the film describes in all its terrible apocalyptic devastation. The film changed them. Tarkovsky was himself a talker and busy intellectual. This paradox and the honesty with which he dissected it gives all his films a painful but vital intensity. The struggle is worth the hope that is eventually achieved. Above all, the richly potent images that are the heart and body of his films, are a rebuke and healing antidote to the posturing of the rational, usually male, intellect.

The tragedy of the early and untimely death of Andrei Tarkovsky, is that he has been cut off in his prime. There were a number of truly great films that he was unable to make. Neither in his beloved homeland, which nevertheless enabled him to make some of the greatest films of the century – (and I doubt whether an epic of the subtlety of Andrei Roublev would ever have been allowed past the drawing board here in the West, let alone a film as densely personal as *Mirror*) – nor here in the West where commercial considerations necessarily restricted his projects. I will always remember him sitting in the Rectory – by the window overlooking Piccadilly and the courtyard of St James's, with the Rectory cat, Mackerel, on his lap – talking with fervour about some of the big projects he longed to do: films about St Anthony, Hamlet and *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky – epic films continuing in the wake of Andrei Roublev and *Mirror* in which he could have given spacious expression to the universal and personal – in the way only he could do. These were not to be.

He gave a talk on the Apocalypse, a central theme in all his work, based on his understanding of our age, that was in fact an apologia for his own life and work. Like all artists and human beings, he wanted to be appreciated and loved. But he was also wise enough to know that only a few would understand and love his work. Maybe for the present only. Future generations will certainly embrace his genius, his insights and the heartstopping beauty of his work as we learn, as we must in order to survive, to dismantle our defences, open our hearts and become human.

# The Apocalypse

ANDREI TARKOVSKY

I'm not really used to hearing such things as I have just heard being said of myself and especially in the context of the theme on which I am going to speak, particularly when these things are said in a church. I feel somewhat timid with some of the perhaps secular conceptions which I have to share with you, but as I am not really going to give you a paper or talk – I'm going to reflect, to share my thoughts with you on what the Apocalypse means for me as an artist – that, I think, will explain why I am venturing to speak in this way here.

The very fact of my taking part in this festival is, for me, apocalyptic in the sense that if I had been told a few months ago that I was going to speak on this theme and take part in this festival, I would not have believed it. But in so far as lately my life has really taken on an apocalyptic character, this step becomes quite logical.

The Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, is perhaps the very greatest piece of poetry that has ever been created in the world. It is inspired from on high. It is something which encompasses, embraces all the laws given to man from on high. We know that there have been for some time past now, various controversies over different readings of this or that section of the Book of Revelation according to St John. We have also become used to the fact that the Book of Revelation is interpreted and this is, in my view, precisely what should not be done, because it seems to me that it does not lend itself to interpretation. There are no symbols of the Apocalypse: they are images. Because whereas a symbol can be interpreted, an image cannot be interpreted. A symbol can be deciphered; a certain meaning can be extracted from it – perhaps a 'formula' is a better word – whereas an image is not something that we comprehend intellectually, it is something that can be perceived, intuited, experienced.

For there are endless possibilities of interpretation. It expresses an

Given at St James's Church, Piccadilly, on 20 January 1984.

absolutely unending number of possibilities of linkage, of links between it and the absolute. The Book of Revelation is the last link in the chain that relates the whole of the epic of humanity, the whole epic related in this book, the Bible.

We live in very hard and painful times and the complexities of our time become ever greater with every year that passes – though of course we can all think of periods when the coming of the Apocalypse was considered as being imminent: ‘Blessed is he that readeth and they that hear the words of the prophecy, and keep these things which are written therein; for the time is at hand.’ (Rev. I: 3) – but we do not know, we cannot say when that time is, how it is at hand – that, we do not know. This could happen tomorrow or it could happen in a thousand years’ time and that is where we find the whole meaning of the concept of man necessarily taking responsibility for his life and for his doings. One cannot conceive of the Book of Revelation being created at that moment when our potential is exhausted or when our time, in other words, is completed. So it is impossible to draw any conclusions from the Book of Revelation on ‘time’.

You know of course, you have noticed that in the Book of Revelation there are a great many precise figures, precise dates, periods of time; the number of the righteous is given, the number of the victims is given with great precision – but for me this has no meaning: this is a system of images. It is a system of images which is, so to speak, not stable, and which is emotionally perceived and conceived of by man. Of course figures are very important in our conception of and knowledge of the future of man. But these are conceived and perceived by man very emotionally. To give you an example, I even as a child was always moved and impressed by the details given in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, of Robinson Crusoe keeping lists, being terribly meticulous about the number of objects; the concrete definition through numbers was very important for him.

We have been, so to speak, materialised through the concepts of time and space. And we are materialised, maybe perhaps conned; we are real through those two phenomena, the first of which I have mentioned. We are very sensitive to these two phenomena or categories because they define our physical framework. Man is created in the image and likeness of God. In other words, he has freedom of will and he is able to create.

Lately – well, for some time past – we have been asking ourselves this question: ‘Is not the creative gift one that is simple?’ – and yet why pose such a question when we know that we all have the *one* Father, why such a blasphemous thought? The answer is simple: because in the crisis of culture which we have experienced for the last one hundred years we have come to the conception that the artist can do without any spiritual concepts; without the spiritual; and where creativity (or the gift of creation) has become something instinctive. After all, we know that certain animals have a certain aesthetic sense and are able to create something that has, in a sense, a finish, and formal shape or form. For example, a beehive – the wax created by the bees – that has form. Man has come to consider talent as something that is his possession, and that his creative gift does not make him responsible – does not lay any obligation on him. That is where we come to the lack of spirituality which obtains in so much art in our time. And that explains the questions which some of us ask ourselves when we say: ‘Do I have the right to such an art, such a creation?’ And at that moment of course, we can no longer be satisfied with the attitude of such an artist or creator to his public, or of the response of that public to that artist and his creation. At that moment art is reduced to a formula or a formal searching, or simply consumer goods to be sold and bought. I do not need to tell you that the cinema which was born at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century, is, so to speak, at the very frontier, at the most vulnerable point of what I have just said, that it really was born in the marketplace and is bandied around in the marketplace.

I was recently in the Vatican Museum – an enormous number of their rooms are devoted to modern religious art – you probably all know this – yes, it has to be seen of course – it is *horrifying*. Yes I can understand why it is so horrifying, though I must say I fail to understand why these works are displayed on the walls of the Vatican Museum – how can they possibly nourish anybody who has faith? How can they satisfy the Catholic Administration? It amazes me.

We live in a fallible world. Man is born free – free and without fear, but our history is but a long history of attempts to take refuge, take cover – escape, to escape from nature, and those conditions make us cower up against each other. Our contacts, our relationships with each other, do not happen because we wish them to happen, because we

desire them. They do not happen because we wish to derive pleasure from those relationships, but because we are afraid. Our civilisation, our culture is a mournful one, a fallible one, if that is what we build our relationships on. Technology, all the technological progress that accompanies our history, creates really only props, artificial limbs for us. It lengthens our arms; it sharpens our vision; it enables us to move with extraordinary speed, as though it had some importance in principle. We move many, many times faster than we did last century but we have not become any happier. Our personality is now in conflict with society. Instead of developing harmoniously, and by 'harmonious' I mean both spiritually and materially, our spiritual development has lagged so far behind that we have really been engulfed by this process of technological progress and are simply being borne along by it. We are no longer capable of breaking loose from that rush of technological progress, even if we wanted to. And when we came up against that moment when, for further technological progress, man needed to open up a new source of energy; when man discovered that new source of energy, humanity was no longer capable of using that energy. Morally, it was simply not able, not prepared to use it for its own good. We are like savages who simply would not know what to do with an electron microscope. Yes, we might use it to knock down a wall, to knock in a nail, it is possible. We are simply slaves of a process we are no longer capable of stopping. Historically, we have started trusting each other as much as we are capable of trusting each other because everything is organised for the common survival. So much so that each one of us no longer takes part in social life, we have contracted out of it as individuals. The mass, the collective, has some kind of sense, but the individual, the individuality of the individual, no longer has any sense.

We have abdicated from that which was given to us, freedom of will and personal responsibility. We no longer have the possibility of choosing, or the capability of choosing. That is why I consider our civilisation to be wrong. The Russian thinker and historian, Berdyaev, made a very sensitive remark when he said that in the history of 'civilisation' – let's call it 'civilisation' – there are two stages. The first stage is the history of culture when man's development was basically an harmonious one, when it had not lost its spiritual basis, and the second stage is when we find the chain reaction of man's inability, man who has lost his sense of responsibility, when the dynamics of action are no



longer within his control. And that is when society loses culture and that is when culture, which is harmonious, is lost and 'civilisation' comes into its own.

As I have said, the Book of Revelation is for me an image of man's soul: man, his responsibility, his obligations, his duties. Man is living through that which is in fact the theme of the author of Revelation, St John the Divine, and this, which the Book of Revelation is about, is lived through, is experienced by every man. And no one can escape this experience. And that is why we can say that in the last analysis death and suffering are equal because if the personality, the individual, suffers or dies, or if for example a certain historical cycle comes to an end and millions perish, man can only envisage within the framework, within those concepts which are perceptible to him; he cannot go beyond what is comprehensible to him. Let me remind you here of another passage from the Book of Revelation which speaks of our indifference, our coldness, our conformism: 'I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot; I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.'

In other words: indifference – to others. Here, this indifference, this ignoring of others is sin. It is equated with sin before the face of the creator. On the other hand, 'And so, therefore, as many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Be zealous therefore and repent.' In other words, man repentant, or rather I would say, in a state of repentance – that is the beginning of the Way. It comes to different people in different ways, at different times. Let us take Dostoevsky: there is one conception of him as a religious writer, an orthodox, who in fact basically wrote about his own search and his own faith. That seems to me to be not quite exact; it seems to me that he made these tremendous discoveries of which he writes because he was really the first writer to have gone through, to have perceived all the problems of a loss of spirituality. His heroes suffer because they cannot believe – they wish to believe but they have lost the faculty or capability of believing. Their conscience has become atrophied. Dostoevsky is perhaps becoming more comprehensible, more fashionable precisely because the problems of which he speaks are becoming more and more prevalent with every year.

The most difficult thing of all is to believe. It is not easy, because we cannot just simply hope for or rely on grace. Of course, happy is the

man who has been given the gift of grace, but it is far from each one of us to be able to say that he has that gift: the gift of being able to feel free, happy, and above all, to be rid of fear. In the Book of Revelation all these problems are contained in a really miraculous way, and, I should say, by means of images that encompass a whole set of problems.

Finally, the Book of Revelation is an analogy about faith, destiny – the faith of man who cannot be separated from his faith as an individual and as a part of society, the group, the collective, the mass. When nature comes to the rescue and saves a particular species, the part of the species so saved does not experience this as a drama, but in so far as man chooses his own path, his own way, because of the gift of will and freedom of choice that he is given, he cannot save all. He can only save himself – but because he can save himself, he can save others, and only because of that.

We do not know what love is. We are guilty of the most awful sins of self-rejection. We deny ourselves because frequently we do not understand what it actually means to 'love thyself'. Maybe we even feel somewhat guilty of such a concept because we misinterpret this as meaning 'love thyself' in the sense of being an egoist. That is a mistake. For love is sacrifice. For man does not sense, experience, feel that love. A third person can see that – it is visible from the side. You of course know the words, 'Love thy neighbour as thyself'. To love oneself is the necessary foundation of the feeling; it is the criterion, the measure. Not only because man at that moment has taken cognizance, has become aware of himself and of the meaning of his life: but because, you see, one always has to start with oneself, that is the beginning. I'm not saying at all that I have been successful in conveying all that of which I have been speaking; I am very far from trying to give myself as an example of this, obviously; on the contrary, I consider that most of my misfortunes come from the fact that I have not followed my own advice! The circumstances are so obvious that the result is also obvious. The result or end to which a faulty approach will lead us, that too is also obvious. It would be wrong to consider that the Book of Revelation only contains within itself a concept of punishment, of retribution; it seems to me that what it really contains above all, is hope. The time is near, yes indeed, for each one of us the time is indeed very, very close at hand. But for all of us together? – It is never too late. So yes, the Book of Revelation is a fearful book for each of us individually, but for all of us

together, as one, there it is a book of hope. The sense of this message contained therein is one of hope.

This dialectic, the sense it contains is expressed by images; as such it is for an artist a source of immense inspiration, it so inspires the artist, that one is actually amazed at how many points of support can be found in it. As regards the destruction of time and space, the coming to a new order, the words used are of almost unbearable beauty and majesty. For example, the disappearance of space: 'And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together. And every mountain and island were moved out of their places.' These are majestic words, of the heaven that 'departed as a scroll when it is rolled together' – there is nothing more beautiful for me.

And this is what happened when the seventh seal was broken. What can any artist say of the words in which this thought is expressed? How can the very concept be otherwise or better expressed? And this is what the Book of Revelation says: 'And when He (in other words, when the Lamb) had opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven, about the space of half an hour.' And as a friend of mine says, 'Words are no longer possible'. It is an image the sense of which is the absence of image.

The seventh seal has been opened – and what happens? Nothing. There is silence. The absence of any image here is the most powerful 'image', if I may say so, that could possibly be conceived of. It is a miracle. It is impossible for the imagination to conceive of this, grasp it.

I once read a book which I liked very much and interested me greatly. It is by an American writer of Spanish origin I think, a man called Castaneda. He wrote a number of books under the collective title of *The Lessons of Don Juan*. It is really in a sense his own story; the story of a journalist who sat at the feet and learned a great deal from a Mexican sorcerer. It is an amazingly interesting book. But even the story itself is not the most important thing – the concept is immensely important. There is now, so to speak, a legend that there was certainly no sorcerer, that all this is made up, invented, that Castaneda invented all this – there was no sorcerer, there was no teaching or process of learning by means of which he wants to change the world or the sorcerer and his methods. But saying that he never existed, that there was no sorcerer,

far from simplifying the whole matter, in fact makes it much more complex. In other words, if this is invented by one man and is not, so to speak, historical truth, then this is truly a miracle and is indeed an even greater miracle than if that had actually taken place. So, in other words, my thought can be reduced to the fact that the image in art is always a miracle.

And now a few words on 'time', again very beautiful words: 'And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth, lifted up his hand to heaven and swore by him that liveth for ever and ever, who created heaven and the things that therein are, and the earth and the things that therein are, and the sea and the things which art therein, that there should be time no longer.' It is a promise, a hope. Nonetheless, the mystery remains, for there remains in the Book of Revelation a very mysterious passage which is strange in that context of the Apocalypse. Here are these mysterious words: 'And when the seven thunders had uttered their voices, I was about to write and I heard a voice from heaven say unto me, "Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered and write them not."'

What is it that St John the Divine hid from us? And why did he tell us that he has hidden something from us? What do these strange, mysterious words actually relate to? Is there a sort of moment of disjuncture between the angel and St John the Divine? What is it that man must not know? And yet the sense of the whole book is that man should know.

It may be the very concept of knowledge; knowledge which makes us unhappy. And remember that knowledge multiplies our miseries and sorrows. Was it our *fate* that had to be hidden from us? Perhaps the precise moment when that fate comes to fruition. I certainly would not wish to live with an exact prophecy of what life had in store for me. At that moment, life would lose all meaning. If I know what is in store for me, what meaning is there? I am talking of course of my own personal fate, my own destiny. There is something of immense nobility about those words, before which man stands as a child; a child that is both totally vulnerable, defenceless, and yet is protected. It has been done so that our knowledge should be incomplete, so that we should not befoul eternity, and to leave us with hope – because in not knowing there is hope. Not knowing – there is nobility in that. Knowing, knowledge is vulgar, cheap. And so the hope that we find expressed in

the Book of Revelation – it is a concern, the concern which inhabits every sentence. It gives me far greater hope than causes to fear.

And now I ask myself a question: So what must I do? What must I do having read the Book of Revelation? Of course I am no longer as I was before. I can no longer be as I was before not only because I have been profoundly changed, but because I have been told that, knowing what I now know, I am called to, I am obliged to change. And I begin to think that the art to which I devote myself is only possible when it does not express me myself, but charges itself with that which I can receive from others. Art becomes a sin, is sinful if I use it for my own interests, for my own ends. And above all, I stop being of any interest to myself. Maybe that is the beginning – that is perhaps the moment at which ‘Love thyself’ begins.

I wish to thank those who have invited me here tonight for this meeting with you. I did not set out to reveal anything you did not know, and I have received what I hoped to receive. Reflecting in this way, in your presence, I have experienced the importance, the significance of this process. You have given me the chance to come to some conclusions and to reflect on some new thoughts, because to think on these things is impossible in isolation.

And preparing to begin work on my new film, preparing to take a new step in this direction, it is quite clear to me that I must not consider it as some kind of form of free art, free creation, but as an act which somehow is perhaps forced out of me when the creative act can no longer simply bring satisfaction but becomes a painful, perhaps even oppressive, obligation.

I have never understood how an artist can be happy in the process of creating. Perhaps the word is inexact – but happy? NEVER. Man does not live in order to be happy. There are far, far more important things than to be happy.

*Tarkovsky's paper was followed by questions:*

**Q.** How far can your films be interpreted?

**A.T.** I would just like to stop on this question for a moment. Interpretation is a question of understanding – that is the general understanding of that word. But it's the source of a great mistake.

Because you cannot understand art – one can understand a formula, a philosophical concept, some intellectual conclusion – but to understand an image, it's a non-sense, one cannot say that. An image can be taken into one, can be accepted; one can enter into an image, one can enter into it when one is undisturbed by anything else, when there is a spiritual empathy with that image. Or, on the contrary, one can be repulsed, rejected, and one can reject, not accept that image: those are the only possible relations that can exist between the artist and his public. Goethe in his time said that to read a good book is as difficult as writing it. This is perhaps the most painful question, this question of understanding. Art does not require understanding. Art must rely on the ability, on its own ability to enable the viewer/the reader/ the audience to enter into it. To enter into it to such a degree that the reader etc. feels that he has been the creator of that work of art. Or to be surprised why one is not the creator. So to such an extent must a work of art become at one with the reader etc., become really a part of him, enter into him. So the question of interpretation – on the emotional level, not on the intellectual level but on the emotional level – is a completely different experience, is something completely different from interpretation at the intellectual level. As a rule this never happens. As a rule this moment of empathy, of entering, remains obscure, remains a mystery, eludes the reader etc. at precisely that moment at which the question of the meaning, the interpretation, the conception of the work arises. Because true art is founded on the true image. And simply is not subject to interpretation, among other things, because it is pregnant of so many countless interpretations. In that sense what I am saying is probably much closer to an Eastern point of view, an Eastern concept of things – for example, that which pertains in Zen. Because to somehow reveal one's attitude to things is to open up one's attitude to the infinite by means of the finite – the spiritual by means of the material, the physical – the invisible by means of the visible. That, it seems to me, should be absolutely obvious – if we just bring a small corrective to our conception of art. But it is very, very important to do this. I have noticed that people who are unprepared in the cultural sense of the word, people who so to speak do not have a culture are much more ready to make this correction. Because someone who is cultured, who knows art, is also full of pretensions. That is what I must say concerning interpretation as such. I'm often told



that I make films which are full of symbols, which are symbolic. And people simply do not believe me when I say that there is not a single symbol in my films. Maybe what I am saying is not of primary interest to you – but I am not trying to produce paradoxes – simply, what I have said is true. What is a symbol? It is a cipher, an encoded idea, a concept, which can be deciphered. The moment a viewer understands, deciphers, all is over, finished: the illusion of the infinite becomes banality, a commonplace, a truism. The mystery disappears – disappears that sense of wholeness and yet enclosed mystery. Those of you who love music and poetry will understand what I am talking about. And I see absolutely no difference in a perception of, an experience of music, of poetry, and of film. Of course our art (i.e. film) was born in the square, in the public place – in sin and filth. Well, let's consider it as original sin . . . So, yes indeed, interpretation is a very complex thing; there is a great difference between one understanding and another – between one interpretation and another form of interpretation. That perhaps is all I wish to say on this question.

(The questions resume. There is some confusion over a question which cites Berdyaev. The actual question, or proposition, put in Russian, is unfortunately lost and not translated. My impression from the tape is that the question was a little unusual. Tarkovsky replied to it in this fashion . . .)

**A.T.** No, I do not agree with the proposition. I know Berdyaev says this. But Berdyaev is lucky in having died already. I'm alive. And I myself cannot draw such a conclusion. Because I think the time is past for the possibility of drawing such a conclusion: On the eve of Berdyaev's death – at the time Berdyaev was still alive one could still believe this. But I am afraid history is unfolding itself in such a catastrophic way that I think there is no longer any time to interpret the Book of Revelation as a warning in the sense that you have said. On the other hand the ways of the Lord are mysterious. There is, if you like, the other view, that the act of even one sinner is capable of saving us all. But to draw any sort of conclusion from the system of views – I mean for example an interpretation, a human approach to the Book of Revelation as a warning, as a statement of the time that is necessary for the process of rebirth, of renewal – but there is no more time, there simply isn't the

time. It seems to me that in view of all that I have said that if Berdyaev were still alive he would abdicate from that point of view.

**Q.** Judging from the final comments of your talk and recent events it could be taken that the direction of your future work has changed, and that in fact you already have an impression, a definite idea of the direction you will be moving in?

**A.T.** Maybe this is so, but if it is I have not noticed it. Of course we all change all the time; but it is very difficult to observe one's own changing. If you think my last film does show a certain change of direction, of outlook, of concept, I'd be very grateful if you could explain exactly what it is that you see. I don't see it anywhere. And if there is a change, well, it is a change that has taken place unconsciously.

**Q.** Do you have an idea of your next picture?

**A.T.** Yes, I do have such an idea.

**Q.** Will you discuss it with us?

**A.T.** Nyet. (*Laughter*).

**Q.** You said that although as a group we have hope, as individuals the time is at hand. And yet in your film 'Stalker' the writer or scientist wishes to rush to the shortest route which is the most dangerous and the longest is the most certain, the safest.

**Q.** That is precisely an example of the concrete detail which is made to bear an interpretation. In other words that in the face of such a question, since one of the characters in the film says such a thing the conclusion is drawn – 'ah, this is what the author thinks' – and that in turn is seen as a symbol of a certain point of view. But these words are only said because the concrete facts of the situation portrayed and the character of the protagonist who says it – that those words are only provoked by the situation in which that character finds himself at that moment. It is, if you like, the reality, the concreteness of the ideal world in which the heroes of the film find themselves. But it is in no way the philosophy of existence of the author of the film. If for example one of the protagonists had said the absolute opposite – in other words he had said we must go by the shortest and most direct route and not go roundabout, nothing would have changed. The only change is in the

actual means by which the character proceeds. Such thoughts must not be interpreted ideologically. I have never used any ideological factors in my pictures. I have always sought to compose my pictures of very elementary factors which are absolutely true to life, but which have no reality, no sense if they are torn out of their context. A work of art must have a total effect, must impinge with its wholeness, and not by torn out segments. I'm talking of course of film. Now if you had asked me your question as if I were the author of the scenario, or for example the author of a literary work in which such a piece of dialogue can be found, then that question would be comprehensible because prose is a means of describing the world; prose has a language of its own – it is a language that uses words, it is a semiotic process. But there is no such language in film – though many critics make the mistake. Bazin, Eisenstein, they both considered that film had a language: film has no language, just as music has no language. The musical image has an immediate and intimate relation with the hearer of that music. There is no intermediary, no artificial middle factor. Which is what prose acquires from having a language – that is, a middleman. Film uses the concept of Time, fixing certain phenomena of life which have their place in Time. And that is all it does, nothing more. And even if you made every effort to impose an ideological meaning into this or that frame, this or that scene, you will be perceiving, experiencing by means of your eyes, your ears, and there is no time to pass that experience through any other organ of perception. There is no time, no space for such an intermediary process. There is not time, there is no possibility of immediate interpretation of that which has been seen or heard. If we take, say, a chair – now if we read 'chair' in a piece of prose, we can interpret it, it is a concept and we can at that moment imagine that chair which is most congenial. That is the freedom of creativity of the reader. That's the outside of the medal. That's the obverse in the complementary process to the process of the creator, the writer. Now if I filmed that chair I can't film 'chair' in general, I can't do it conceptually, it's not possible. I will only see one specific concrete chair, which exists in time and space. That is the only art. That is the only incarnation which that art has in time and space. Because in the theatre we have a completely new set of categories. In the theatre both time and space are relative. In music, for example, you can play the same piece of music on different days, in different tempi, and in different ways.

(Interruption: 'But what about the chair in painting?')

In painting that chair is also relative. For example, you can take a surrealist painting of a chair and in a certain sense that chair will become much more real than it is in reality. In painting, no, a chair is not real, it is seen through the prism of the painter's interpretation. (He cites the example of a painting of a piece of bread). It is a sort of horrifying white loaf. It is as though it is perceived through a nightmare. It is so surreal. That could only be done in painting. So what do I want to underline? – that film has no language. At least not in my films. That is what I sought to achieve. And I do hope that this is their achievement. And if this is not so, then, well I have not fully achieved my task.

**Q.** (Donald Reeves\*). From where do you draw your spiritual resources, those resources which nurture you in your creative work: where are you rooted?

**A.T.** I am rooted in that I do not love myself – I do not like myself. I dislike myself. That is my starting point, what drives me to pay attention to other phenomena. And it enables me to go away, to leave myself, and it enables me to seek and find strength not in myself but in that which is around me and above me. I certainly wouldn't say that I find strength within myself.

**Q.** What do you understand of Zen?

**A.T.** When I mentioned Zen and its concept of image, its structure of image, I mentioned it in order perhaps to try and explain my meaning. Not in a literal sense, because finally no parallel is totally faithful. I used it really to try and somehow bring your attention, to make it easier for you to understand what I am trying to say, and so I mentioned Zen which may be familiar to some of you. Any parallel betrays something, because everything is unique and unrepeatable. But what I was trying to say was above all that it is impossible to interpret an image. Because in Zen an image contains within itself infinity and expresses it. Therefore there is no possibility of a finite interpretation. The image becomes the model of infinity. But the artistic image is a reality. For example, you hold a crystal ball in your hand. And by an effort of imagination you can come to see this spherical shape as representing the infinite – not

\* Rector of St James's, Piccadilly.

symbolising it, but expressing it. Just as the infinite is represented, is captured by the ray of light in a drop of water. You see a drop of rain water on a leaf shot through with a ray of sunlight and through our emotional experience we perceive that the infinite is encapsulated in that drop. From that point of view, from that case, what is the point of the artistic image, the creative image – that the infinite is expressed in and through the finite. Whereas a symbol is something that is completely different and has to be interpreted differently. Mathematics are as relevant for the symbol really as the proof of a theorem. That is why I mentioned Zen. Of course, I'm not even touching on the infinitely more complex and other aspects of it. I used the example of the image in Zen to clarify my own approach to the image. I have never yet met people who have seen my films – after I made the film 'Stalker' – I have never yet as I say addressed a single meeting about 'Stalker' without somebody sooner or later saying what is the meaning of the black alsatian. What were you trying to say? And nobody would believe me when I simply said – well, all I wished to represent was a black alsatian. My explanation is never accepted, never satisfies anyone. It is thought that I am reflecting on some important problem and I turn out to be a charlatan, and a trickster. It's simply a black dog. Whereas he thought that that was the secret, the heart of the mystery, something which had escaped him hitherto, which for some reason I had encoded, hidden for reasons that escaped anyone and everyone. As after all I had to express something, not hide it. So those who try and take apart a work of art just as a child takes apart an alarm clock to find out what makes it tick, those are the sort of audience with whom I have really no contact: I have nothing to say to them. And after such exchanges people look at me and you can just see it written on their faces – 'and we thought that even if it escaped us he at least knew what it was about.' You will receive from a work of Art that which you expect to receive – and if for example you go to the cinema and you're trying to calculate something, to seize the author by the hand and try to understand exactly what he's saying then you will neither hear nor see anything. That is not the contact, that is not the contact for art. It is almost impossible to get across the fact that for the perception of art one does not need an explanation – especially intellectual explanations. It is almost impossible to get this across. People just don't understand. Oh in the case of music everything finds its own place – no problem there. But in as far as all the arts are one art –

music is one of those arts – there are many things which are common to all forms of art. For example, the effect that art has on the soul, the heart, as opposed to the mind. So that if for example an artist would have to have an effect that was purely intellectual – in that case it would be easier rather than to make a film to write an essay, and to give it out like a leaflet – read, think. I don't want people to think. I want our hearts to be united in that process of creativity. When a man loves a woman he doesn't demand intellectual efforts, exercises from her: he'd be an absolute monster if he did. There are things that have their own built-in laws, and those laws are in fact very simple. But we are uncouth: uncouth because we think that we have a point of view. And indeed in our time it has been almost impossible not to have a point of view in art. In our time everybody, but everybody, knows what art is. And so everybody makes films. There is a mystery, a mystery in the spiritual sense of the word. Both in the creation and the perception of a work of art. Because it is a spiritual act. So it is really incomprehensible why a work of art is approached with other criteria – as, for example, in a scientific phenomenon. That comes from our uncouthness. Or because we're too clever by half.



The Submissive Lion  
Saying 'God is the forgiving Alleluia'



# Peter Brook and Traditional Thought\*

BASARAB NICOLESCU

## *Theatre and Tradition*

The continual questioning of the meaning of theatre which runs through all Peter Brook's work, forming as it were its axis, inevitably leads him to question Tradition. If theatre is an outpouring of life, then life itself must be questioned. To understand theatrical reality is to understand also the vessel of this reality, the participant in the theatrical event: actor, director, spectator. Moreover, for a man opposed to all dogma and all closed systems of thought, Tradition possesses an ideal character in that it unites contradictions: it asserts its invariability and at the same time it appears under extremely heterogeneous guises, and although it is dedicated to the understanding of unity, it nevertheless encompasses the infinite diversity of reality. Finally, Tradition views understanding as the offspring of experience, beyond all explanation and all theoretical generalisation. After all, the theatrical event is itself first and foremost 'experience'.

Even outwardly, Peter Brook pays obvious attention to Tradition. This is evident in his adaptation for the theatre of one of the masterpieces of Sufi art, Attar's *Conference of the Birds*; in his film of Gurdjieff's book *Meetings with Remarkable Men*; and later in his work on the *Mahabharata*. It is therefore not entirely pointless to look for possible convergences between Peter Brook's work in the theatre and traditional thought.

It is important to make it clear from the outset that the word 'tradition', which is derived from the Latin *tradere*, meaning to hand over or deliver, contains in itself a contradiction of considerable consequence. The most common and familiar definition of 'tradition' is as 'a long-established and generally accepted custom, or method of procedure',<sup>1</sup> and it thus has connections with the words 'custom' and

\* Translated from the essay 'Peter Brook et la pensée traditionnelle' published in volume XIII of *Voies de la création théâtrale*, P. Brook; a collection edited and assembled by G. Banu, Paris, Editions de CNRS, 1985, Copyright, Editions de CNRS.

'habit'. In this sense one can speak of an 'academic tradition', of the 'tradition of the Comédie Française', or of a 'Shakespearian tradition'. In the theatre, 'tradition' represents an attempt at mummification, an attempt to preserve at all costs the outward forms, which thereby, inevitably, conceal a corpse, because of the lack of any living correspondence to the present moment. It is clear that according to this first definition of the word 'tradition', Peter Brook's work appears to be anti-traditional or, more precisely, *a-traditional*. Peter Brook says himself:

By its nature, and even when it is very ancient, the theatre is always an art of modernity, the phoenix that must be continually reborn. Because the image which speaks to the world in which we live, the right effect which creates communication between the performance and the audience, is short-lived. In five years a production is outmoded. We must therefore abandon forever the idea of a theatrical tradition . . .<sup>2</sup>

In a second, less common definition (the only one we will be using in the present study), 'tradition' signifies 'the transmission of statements, beliefs, roles, customs, or the like, especially by word of mouth, or by practice without writing', and also 'a body of teachings transmitted orally from generation to generation since early times'.<sup>3</sup> According to this definition, 'Tradition' encompasses the different 'traditions': Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, Sufi, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

Tradition, then, is essentially concerned with the transmission of a body of knowledge about man's spiritual evolution, his position in the different 'worlds', his relationship to the different 'cosmoses'. This body of knowledge is thus inevitably *invariable*, stable, permanent, notwithstanding the multiple forms it assumes in the course of its transmission and the distortions introduced by time and history. Although the transmission is usually oral, it can also be effected through the science of symbols, through writings and works of art, and through myth and ritual.

Traditional knowledge is set down in time immemorial, but it would be futile to look for a 'source' for Tradition. On its most profound level, Tradition may be conceived as being outside (geographical) space and (historical) time. It is eternally present, here and now, springing eternally within each man. The 'source' of Tradition cannot be other than metaphysical. Because it addresses itself to what is essential in

man, it possesses immediate reality. The works of René Guénon or Mircea Eliade have demonstrated the relevance of traditional thought to our own time. Likewise, more and more in-depth studies are showing the structural convergence between contemporary science and Tradition.

It is precisely the immediate reality of Tradition, evidenced by its oral transmission and by its constant reference to the present moment and to the experience of the present moment, that provides a point of contact between Tradition and the theatre. Peter Brook makes more or less direct reference to this when he says: 'Theatre is the present moment. It is what happens at the moment of acting, at the moment when the two worlds of actors and audience come together. Every evening this society in miniature, this microcosm, gathers in a room, and the role of the theatre is to give it a passionate, fleeting glimpse of another world, to interest it, to transform it, to integrate it.'<sup>5</sup>

We can thus understand why, according to Peter Brook's vision of it, the theatre, which is by its nature 'a-traditional', can nevertheless be a field of study for Tradition. We can also understand why Peter Brook was interested in Gurdjieff's thought, and spent several years at work on the production of a film of one of his books.<sup>6</sup> In our opinion, there are profound correspondences between Peter Brook's work in the theatre and the teachings of Gurdjieff. For this reason the name of Gurdjieff will come up frequently in this study.

While remaining firmly rooted in Tradition, Gurdjieff (1877–1949) managed to express his teaching in the language of contemporary man.<sup>7</sup> He also managed to isolate and formulate, in a scientific fashion, the laws which traverse all levels of reality. These laws ensure a 'unity in diversity'<sup>8</sup>, a unity which goes beyond the infinite variety of manifestations associated with the different levels. They explain why man does not live fragmented into a thousand realities, but within one sole reality which possesses multiple facets.

Aesthetic reality, spiritual reality, scientific reality – do not these all unite in one centre, while remaining strictly distinct and different? Has not contemporary scientific thinking itself, whether quantum or sub-quantum, discovered that nature possesses aspects that are astonishing and paradoxical, and hitherto unsuspected, and which bring it strangely close to Tradition?<sup>9,10</sup>

The encounter between theatrical work, traditional thought and

scientific thought may be unusual, but it is certainly not fortuitous. According to Peter Brook, what attracted him from the age of seventeen to the theatrical form and also to the study of Tradition was precisely the apparent contradiction between art and science, between Tradition and science. It is not surprising, therefore, that a book like Matila Ghyka's *The Golden Number*, which demonstrates the relationship between number, proportion and feeling, should have made a strong impression on him.

The possibility of a dialogue between science and Tradition, between art and Tradition, between science and art, is rich in potential, and it offers us an opportunity to understand a world that is being overwhelmed by an ever more alienating complexity.

*The theatre as a field of study for energy, movement and relationship*

It seems to us that Peter Brook's research into theatre is structured around three poles: energy, movement and relationship. 'The world of appearances,' he writes, 'is a crust – under the crust is the boiling matter we see if we peer into a volcano. How can we tap this energy?'<sup>11</sup> Theatrical reality is thus determined by the movement of energy, a movement which is itself only manifest through relationship: the relationship between the actors and the relationship between text, actors and audience. Movement cannot result from an actor's action. The actor does not make a movement: a movement goes through him. Peter Brook takes Merce Cunningham as his example: '... he has trained his body to obey, his technique is his servant, so that instead of being wrapped up in the making of the movement he can let the movement unfold in intimate company with the unfolding of the music'.<sup>12</sup>

The simultaneous presence of energy, movement and relationship is what makes the theatrical event possible. Speaking of *Orghast*, Peter Brook talked of 'the fire of the event' which is 'the marvellous thing of performance in the theatre. Through it, all the things we'd been working on suddenly fell into place.'<sup>13</sup> This 'falling into place' indicates the sudden discovery of a structure hidden beneath the multiplicity of manifestations which seemed to be going in all directions. We can understand why Peter Brook thinks that the essence of theatrical work is 'freeing the dynamic process'.<sup>14</sup> It is a question of 'freeing', not of

'capturing' this process, which explains the suddenness of the discovery: a linear unfolding would be the sign of mechanistic determinism, whereas the event is linked with a structure which is strictly non-linear, a structure of interrelation or interconnexion.

Event, furthermore, is a key word, which occurs over and over in the work of Peter Brook. It is not, I believe, accidental that the same word designates a central notion in modern scientific thinking since Einstein and Minkowski, for it may be that beyond the infinite multiplicity of its appearances, the basis of reality remains one and the same.

In 1900, Max Planck introduced the concept of the 'elementary quantum of action', which was destined to revolutionise the physical thinking that was based on the notion of continuity. The structure of energy is thus seen to be discrete and discontinuous. In 1905, Einstein formulated his special theory of relativity, which demonstrated a new relationship between space and time and which was to contribute to a radical reversal of the object-energy hierarchy. Gradually, the notion of the object was replaced by the notion of 'event', 'relationship' and 'interconnexion', the real movement being the movement of energy. Quantum mechanics was put together as a theory much later, around 1930, and it shattered the concept of the identity of a classic particle. For the first time the possibility of discontinuous space and time was acknowledged as logically viable. Finally, the theory of elementary particles, which is both a continuation of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity, and an attempt to go beyond these two physical theories, is in the process of formation today.

Like the contemporary scientist or Gurdjieff, Peter Brook is convinced of the materiality of energy. Commenting on the character of 'rough theatre', he writes: 'The Holy theatre has one energy, the Rough has others. Lightheartedness and gaiety feed it, but so does the same energy that produces rebellion and opposition. This is a militant energy: it is the energy of anger, sometimes the energy of hate.'<sup>15</sup>

Gurdjieff, too, said: 'Everything in the Universe is material: therefore the Great Knowledge is more materialistic than materialism.'<sup>16</sup> Obviously he distinguishes 'matter' from 'materiality': '... matter is the same, but materiality is different. And different degrees of materiality depend directly upon the qualities and properties of the energy manifested at a given point.'<sup>17</sup> 'Objects' are thus local configurations of energy.

Where, then, does this energy come from? What are the laws governing the transformation of non-differentiated energy into a specific form of energy? Is this non-differentiated energy the ground of all manifestation? To what extent are actors and audience integrated, during a theatrical performance, to the formidable conflict of energies which takes place at every moment in nature?

First and foremost, we believe it is important to recognise that in Peter Brook's theatrical research, the ensemble of text/actors/audience possesses the characteristics of a natural system: when a true theatrical 'event' occurs, it is greater than the sum of its parts. The interaction between text and actors, text and audience, and actors and audience is the new and irreducible element. At the same time, text, actors and audience are true sub-systems, which open into one another. In this sense one can speak of the life of a text. As Peter Brook has said repeatedly, a play does not have a form that is fixed once and for all. It evolves – or involves – in relation to the actors and the audience. The death of a text is linked to closure, to the absence of interchange. 'A doctor can tell at once between the trace of life and the useless bag of bones that life has left; but we are less practised in observing how an idea, an attitude or a form can pass from the lively to the moribund.'<sup>18</sup>

Can one say that the system of text/actors/ audience also possesses one of the most important features of natural systems, which is to be 'modules of coordination in the hierarchy of nature'?<sup>19</sup> The answer is yes, to the extent that the spectator can leave a theatrical 'event' enriched by a new energy input.

... I was also looking for movement and energy. Both the energy of the body and the energy of feeling, so that the energy on stage releases in the spectator a feeling of vitality which he does not experience in everyday life.<sup>20</sup>

As the recipient of the 'feeling of vitality', the spectator will be able to participate in his life in other openings and interchanges.

The essence of the matter, however, is elsewhere. It lies in the recognition, on its own level, of the action of the laws which are common to all levels. The universe can be conceived, as in Gurdjieff's cosmology or systems science,<sup>21</sup> as a great Whole, a vast cosmic matrix where everything is perpetual movement and energy structuring. But this unity is not static; it implies differentiation and diversity through

the existence, not of a substance, but of a common organisation, which is due to the laws of division of the Whole. These laws are fully operative when the systems open into each other, in a perpetual and universal interchange of energy.

This interchange ensures what Gurdjieff calls 'the common cosmic harmony', the 'common-system harmonious movement', or 'the - harmony - of - Reciprocal - Maintenance - of - all - Cosmic - Concentrations'.<sup>22</sup> The openness of the system prevents its disintegration and death. *Non-separability* is the safeguard of life. It is well known that all closed physical systems are subject to the Clausius-Carnot principle, involving an inevitable degeneracy of energy and increasing disorder. For order and stability to exist, there must be openness and interchange. This interchange can operate between the systems on one level or between systems which belong on different levels.

Practically all the 'exercises' and 'improvisations' of the actors at the *Centre International de Recherches Théâtrales*, directed by Peter Brook, seem to us to aim at the realisation of openness and interchange. There is ample evidence for this, whether it is a question of preparing for the *Conference of the Birds*, for *Orghast*, or for *Carmen*.<sup>23,24</sup> Peter Brook says himself quite explicitly that through exercise and improvisation the actors try '... to arrive at the essential, that is to say to the area where the impulses of one join the impulses of the other and sound together'.<sup>25</sup> When, in preparing for *Carmen*, a singer turns his back on another and tries to copy the gesture which accompanies the other's singing without having seen it,<sup>26</sup> or when the actors, seated in a circle, attempt to 'transmit' gestures<sup>27</sup> or words,<sup>28</sup> and when, finally, the strength and the precision of the inner image is such that it can be made 'visible',<sup>29</sup> it is true research, precise and strict, which is being carried out. In an exercise for the preparation of *Orghast*, each actor took one part of a person, including, for example, 'the voice of the sub-conscious'.<sup>30</sup> In another exercise, the actor takes part in the recital of a soliloquy from Shakespeare in three voices, in the form of a round, and 'suddenly he bursts a barrier and experiences how much freedom there can be within the tightest discipline'.<sup>31</sup> For this is the point: the discovery of freedom through submission to laws which enable one to open up to the 'unknown', to a relationship. 'To "be" means to be related' was the arresting phrase used by Alfred Korzybski, the founder of General Semantics.<sup>32</sup> The exercises and improvisations offer the possibility of

'inter-relating the most ordinary and the most hidden levels of experience',<sup>33</sup> of discovering the potentially powerful equivalences between gestures, sounds and words. Words, which are the usual vehicles of meaning, can thus be replaced by gestures or sounds: 'Going into the unknown is always frightening. Each letter is the cause of the letter that follows. Hours of work can come out of ten letters, in a search to free the word, the sound. *We are not trying to create a method, we want to make discoveries.*'<sup>34</sup> Exercises and improvisations are therefore crutches, valueless in themselves, but which make possible the refining of the theatrical 'instrument' – the actor's being – and the 'living dramatic flow'<sup>35</sup> within the group of actors. The theatrical 'miracle' occurs *afterwards*, in the active presence of the audience, when the opening-up to the 'unknown' can become fully operative. But what is the nature of this 'unknown'? Is it another name for the unity of the indefinite connection of 'systems of systems', as Stéphane Lupasco<sup>36</sup> said, in a paradoxical coexistence of determined and indeterminate, constraint and spontaneity, homogeneity and heterogeneity? How are we to understand the words of Attar when he wrote, in the 'Invocation' to *The Conference of the Birds*: 'To each atom there is a different door, and for each atom there is a different way which leads to the mysterious Being of whom I speak . . . In this vast ocean the world is an atom and the atom a world'?'<sup>37</sup>

Traditional thought has always affirmed that Reality is not bound to space and time: it is. Gurdjieff, speaking of the 'Trogoautoegocratic process', which ensures 'the Reciprocal-feeding of everything that exists', stated that it is 'the true Saviour from the law-conformable action of the merciless Heropass'.<sup>38</sup> When we realise that for him 'Heropass' means 'Time', we can understand the sense of his statement: the unity of the indefinite connection of systems escapes the action of time; it is, outside space and time. Time, that 'unique ideally subjective phenomenon', does not exist as such. The space-time continuum, when it is considered in isolation, is thus a sort of approximation, a subjective phenomenon, connected with a sub-system. Every sub-system that corresponds to a certain 'degree of materiality' possesses its own space and time.

Finally, in certain recent scientific theories<sup>39</sup> descriptions of physical reality require the introduction of dimensions other than those of space and time. The physical 'event' takes place in all dimensions at



once. Consequently, one can no longer speak, on this level, of linear, continuous time. There is a law of causality, but the event occurs suddenly. There is no 'before' and 'after' in the usual sense – there is, as it were, a discontinuity in the concept of time itself.

Can one speak of the theatrical 'event' without immersing oneself in the experience of time? One can go further, and say that the essence of the Brookian theatrical event lies in its suddenness, in its unexpectedness (in the sense of the impossibility of reproducing it at will): 'The special moments no longer happen by luck,' says Peter Brook. 'Yet they can't be repeated. It's why spontaneous events are so terrifying and marvellous. They can only be rediscovered.'<sup>40</sup> 'Meaning never belongs to the past',<sup>41</sup> it makes its appearance in the mystery of the present moment, of the instant, of the opening-up to relationship. This 'meaning' is infinitely richer than the meaning to which classic 'rational' thinking has access, a thinking which is based, possibly without being aware of it, on linear causality and mechanistic determinism. From time to time, great actors can touch on this new area of 'meaning'. In the case of Paul Scofield, for example,

... instrument and player are one – an instrument of flesh and blood that opens itself to the unknown ... It was as though the act of speaking a word sent through him vibrations that echoed back meanings far more complex than his rational thinking could find ...<sup>42</sup>

There is something primitive, direct and immediate in the idea of the 'present instant': a sort of absolute freedom in relation to representation, a sort of vital, conscious spontaneity. 'The idea of the present instant,' writes Peirce, 'of which, whether or not it exists, one thinks of naturally as a point in time where no thought can occur, no detail can be separated, is an idea of Primeity ...',<sup>43</sup> Primeity being '... the mode of being of that which is as it is, positively and with no reference to anything else'.<sup>44</sup>

The 'miracle' of Peter Brook's work in the theatre seems to me to lie precisely in this sense of the moment, in the freeing of the energies which circulate in a harmonious flow, involving the spectator as an active participant in the theatrical event. Paradoxically, it is not his film *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, but a play such as *The Cherry Orchard* which incarnates all the 'convergences' of which we have been speaking. This

is perhaps due to the difference between the cinema and the theatre, as Peter Brook has emphasised: 'There is only one interesting difference between the cinema and the theatre. The cinema flashes on to a screen images from the past. As this is what the mind does to itself all through life, the cinema seems intimately real. Of course, it is nothing of the sort – it is a satisfying and enjoyable extension of the unreality of everyday perception. The theatre, on the other hand, always asserts itself in the present. This is what can make it more real than the normal stream of consciousness. This also is what can make it so disturbing.'<sup>45</sup> Through the texts of Chekhov, that 'playwright of the movement of life',<sup>46</sup> or of Shakespeare, all the dimensions of Peter Brook's theatrical work are revealed. In *The Cherry Orchard* there are particular moments when apparently banal words and gestures waver, opening up suddenly to another reality which one feels is the only one that really counts. A flow of energy begins to circulate, an energy of a new quality, and the spectator is transported to other heights, to a dazzling encounter with himself. The imprint of this on the memory persists for a very long time – a sign that the theatre, even if it is a 'self-destructive art',<sup>47</sup> is nevertheless capable of a certain permanence.

#### *The trine structure of Brookian theatrical space*

Another remarkable convergence between Peter Brook's work in the theatre, traditional thought and quantum thinking can be found in the recognition of contradiction as the 'mainspring' of all processes of reality.

The part played by contradiction is apparent in the progress of Peter Brook himself through Shakespeare, commercial comedy, television, cinema and opera: '... I've really spent all my working life in looking for opposites ... This is a dialectical principle of finding a reality through opposites,' he said in an interview with *The Times*.<sup>48</sup> He stresses the role of the theatre in awakening the understanding, taking Elizabethan drama as his example: 'Drama was exposure, it was confrontation, it was contradiction, and it led to analysis, involvement, recognition and, eventually, to an awakening of understanding.'<sup>49</sup> Contradiction is not destructive; it is equilibrating. It has a part to play in the birth of every process. Without contradiction everything would tend towards homogeneity, towards the dissipation of energy, towards death. 'Whoever grasps contradiction ... grasps the world,' says

Lupasco, whose conclusions are based on quantum physics.<sup>50</sup> Peter Brook demonstrates the constructive role of negation in the theatre of Beckett: 'Beckett does not say "no" with satisfaction; he forges his merciless "no" out of a longing for "yes", and so his despair is the negative from which the contour of its opposite can be drawn.'<sup>51</sup> Contradiction also plays a primordial role in the plays of Shakespeare which 'pass through many stages of consciousness. What enabled him technically to do so . . . is a roughness of texture and a conscious mingling of opposites . . .'<sup>52</sup> Shakespeare remains the great summit, the indestructible landmark of a possible evolution in the theatre:

It is through the unreconciled opposition of Rough and Holy, through an atonal speech of absolutely unsympathetic keys that we get the distorting and the unforgettable impressions of his plays. It is because the contradictions are so strong that they burn in us so deeply.<sup>53</sup>

Peter Brook sees *King Lear* as 'a vast, complex, coherent poem', which attains cosmic dimensions in its revelation of 'the power and the emptiness of nothing – the positive and negative aspects latent in zero'.<sup>54</sup>

Contradiction is the *sine qua non* of success for all theatrical performances. Zeami (1363–1444), one of the first great Nō masters, whose treatises make up what is called 'the secret tradition of Nō', remarked five centuries ago: 'According to a secret teaching, any endeavour will meet with success at the point where the principles of yin and yang are harmonized . . . if the spirit of yang is applied to yang, or the spirit of yin to yin, no harmonization can take place, and no success will be forthcoming. And without such a harmony, such a fulfilment, there will be nothing of interest in the performance.'<sup>55</sup>

For traditional thinkers like Zeami, Jakob Böhme or Gurdjieff, but also for philosophers such as Peirce and Lupasco, whose thinking is based on scientific knowledge, contradiction is nothing less than the dynamic of three independent forces which are simultaneously present in all the processes of reality: an affirmative force, a negative force and a reconciling force. Reality thus possesses a dynamic trine structure, a trialectic structure.

Zeami, for example, formulated a law called *Johakyū*, to which Peter Brook often refers.<sup>56</sup> 'Jo' means 'beginning, opening'; 'ha' means

'middle, development' (and also 'to break, to crumble, to expose'), and 'kyū' means 'end, ending' (and also 'rapidity, haste, paroxysm'). According to Zeami, not only theatrical performance itself but also every vocal or instrumental phrase, every movement, every step and word, can be reduced to jo, ha and kyū.

Zeami's observations have great pertinence for our time. It is easy, for example, to imagine the boredom induced by the performance of a tragedy which begins with a paroxysm and develops through endless explanations about the causes of drama. One could also undertake a detailed analysis of the magical atmosphere which imbues the plays staged by Peter Brook as a result of their conformity with the law of Johakyū, both in the progression of the plays and the acting of the actors.

But the most personal aspect of Peter Brook's work in the theatre seems to me to lie in his revelation of a new trine structure.

Brookian theatrical space could be symbolised by a triangle, whose base represents the awareness of the audience and the two sides the actor's inner vision and his relationship with his partners, respectively. This triple aspect is constantly present in Peter Brook's work and writings. In ordinary life, our contacts are often reduced to a confrontation between our inner vision and our relationship with our partners – the triangle is mutilated, because the base is missing. In the theatre, the actors are confronted with 'their ultimate responsibility, which is absolute: their relationship with the audience. This, in fact, is what gives theatre its true meaning.'<sup>57</sup> We will come back in the next section to the primordial role of the audience in Brookian theatrical space.

Another trine structure functioning in theatrical space is obtained by using the notion of 'centres' proposed by Gurdjieff, who thought that what distinguishes man from other beings in nature is the fact that he is 'tricentric', 'tricerebral': a being with three 'centres'. In this way, man himself can be represented by a triangle, the base of which represents the feeling-centre (Reconciling), and the two other sides the thinking-centre (Affirming) and the moving centre (Denying). Harmony is the equilibrium of the three, the attainment of a state of 'all-brained-balanced-being-perceptiveness'.<sup>58</sup>

It is obvious that the conditions of modern life are particularly favourable to the function of the intellectual centre, especially of the 'automated' part of that centre, which we may call the 'mental' part.

The 'mental' part, which is undoubtedly a powerful instrument for the adaptation of man to his environment, is transformed from a 'means' into an 'end', and functions as an all-powerful 'tyrant'. The triangle representing man is thus threatened with disintegration by the unbalanced extension of one of its sides. The consequences of this process are inevitably present in theatrical space.

John Heilpern, who has written a lively account of the 'expedition' into Africa with the Actors of the C.I.R.T., tells of his astonishment at hearing Peter Brook speak of the role of the 'mental' part: 'He pointed to the imbalance within us where the golden calf of the intellect is worshipped at the cost of true feelings and experience. Like Jung, he believes that the intellectual – the intellect alone – protects us from true feelings, stifles and camouflages the spirit in a blind collection of facts and concepts . . . I was struck forcibly by the fact that he, a supreme intellectual figure, should express himself in this way.'<sup>59</sup> The man who berated the 'emotional constipation' of 20th century man<sup>60</sup> could feel no liking for the 'deadly theatre'. He sees such a theatre as the expression itself of the 'mental' part in its attempt to appropriate true feeling and experience:

To make matters worse there is always a deadly spectator, who for special reasons enjoys a lack of intensity and even a lack of entertainment, such as the scholar who emerges from routine performances of the classics smiling because nothing has distracted him from trying over and confirming his pet theories to himself, while reciting his favourite lines under his breath. In his heart he sincerely wants a theatre that is nobler-than-life and he confuses a sort of intellectual satisfaction with the true experience for which he craves . . .'<sup>61</sup>

Harmony between the centres creates the possibility for a new perception, a 'direct', immediate perception which does not pass through the deforming filter of the 'mental' part. In this way a new intelligence can make its appearance: ' . . . along with the emotion there is always a role for a special intelligence, that is not there at the start, but which has to be developed as a selecting instrument'.<sup>62</sup>

Many of the exercises suggested by Peter Brook seek to ensure this very unity of thought, body and feeling through freeing the actor from too 'mental' an attitude. The actor can thus be allied organically with himself and can act as a whole unfragmented being. In the course of

this research an important aspect of the centres' functioning comes to light: the great difference that exists between their 'speeds'. According to Gurdjieff,<sup>63</sup> the intellectual centre is the slowest, and the emotional centre the quickest: its impressions always appear to us to be instantaneous.

We are thus able to understand how the 'urgency' of an exercise can lead to the discovery of the common law by bringing into play the quickest centres.<sup>64</sup> During the preparation for *Carmen*, the actors were asked to walk around while making a sound, and to go from piano to fortissimo without altering their pace.<sup>65</sup> The difficulty of this exercise revealed the lack of harmony between the centres, the blockage of the quick centres by the intellectual centre. The same observation applies to the exercise in which the feet were beating out a rhythm in four while the hands beat out a rhythm in three.<sup>66</sup> Some exercises allow one to 'photograph' the functioning of the centres at a given moment. Fixed in a certain position, the actor can discover the contradictory functioning of the different centres and thus find, through experiment, a way to make them function in harmony.

It would be possible to establish revealing correspondences between the two triangles of Brookian theatrical space and the centres. In particular, the 'isomorphism' between the two triangles could throw a light on the role of the audience as a catalyst for the impressions of the emotional centre. But this would take us too far out of our way, and in any case no theoretical analysis can take the place of the richness of actual immersion in Brookian theatrical space.

The most spectacular illustration of the primordial role of experience in the work of Peter Brook is perhaps the preparation for the *Conference of the Birds*. Instead of plunging the actors into a study of Attar's text, or involving them in an erudite analysis of Sufi writings, Peter Brook swept them off on an astonishing 'expedition' into Africa. Faced with the difficulties inherent in crossing the desert, forced to improvise in front of the inhabitants of the African villages, the actors were led inexorably to an encounter with themselves: 'Everything we are doing on this trip is an exercise in refining perception on all conceivable levels. One can call a theatrical performance "a grand exercise". But everything feeds the work, and everything that surrounds it is part of a greater test of self-awareness. One could call it "the super-grand exercise".'<sup>67</sup> The encounter with oneself through a long and arduous

self-initiation is the keystone of Attar's poem. This sort of organic, experimental approach to a text is of far greater value than any theoretical, methodical or systematic study. It is marked by the appearance of a certain very special 'quality' which is the most tangible thing about Peter Brook's work. The significance of his remarks about *Orghast* is relevant both to the *Conference of the Birds* and to all his other plays: 'The result we are working towards is not a form, not an image, but a set of conditions in which a certain quality of performance can arise.'<sup>68</sup> This 'quality' is related to the free flow of energy, by means of precise and detailed (it could almost be called 'scientific') work on *perception*. Strictness is associated with spontaneity, precision with freedom.

#### *Theatre, determinism and spontaneity*

How does one reconcile strictness with spontaneity? What is the source of spontaneity? What does it mean? How is one to distinguish true spontaneity from a simple automatic, associative function among a whole host of pre-existing but unconscious clichés? In other words, how is one to distinguish the association, possibly unexpected but nevertheless mechanical, between the previously-seen and the previously-experienced from the emergence of something really new?

Spontaneity introduces an element of *indeterminacy* into all evolutionary processes. Heisenberg's famous relationships of indeterminacy indicate that spontaneity is effectively active in Nature.

These relationships tell us that the product of the extension in momentum of a quantum event through its extension in space, or the product of its extension in energy through its extension in time, must be superior to a certain constant representing the elementary quantum of action. Thus, if, for example, one asks for an exact and precise spatial localisation of the quantum event, the extension in momentum becomes infinite; and if one asks for its exact and precise temporal localisation, the extension in energy must be infinite. No very high level of sophisticated mathematical or physical knowledge is needed to understand that this signifies the impossibility of an exact localisation in space and time of a quantum event. The concept of the *identity* of a classic particle – an identity defined in relation to the particle itself, as a part separated from the Whole – is thus annihilated.

The quantum event is not a wave or a corpuscle; it is wave and

corpuscle simultaneously. The impossibility of an exact localisation in space and time of a quantum event can be seen as a consequence of the non-separability of events. Their 'uncertain' and 'probabilistic' character is not a product of the action of 'chance'. Quantum uncertainty is constructive, it has a direction, which is that of the self-organisation of natural systems. At the same time, the observer ceases to be an 'observer' and becomes, as Wheeler said, a 'participant'. Quantum thinking has its place in the 'valley of Astonishment' (one of the seven valleys in the *Conference of the Birds*) in which contradiction and indeterminacy lie in wait for the traveller.

We could postulate the existence of a *general principle of indeterminacy*, operative in all the processes of reality. It is of necessity operative in theatrical space, above all in the relationship between the audience and the play. In the 'formula' for the theatre proposed by Peter Brook (Theatre = Rra . . . Répétition, représentation, assistance)<sup>69</sup> the audience, the assistance, plays an essential role:

The only thing that all forms of theatre have in common is the need for an audience. This is more than a truism: in the theatre the audience completes the steps of creation.<sup>70</sup>

The audience is part of a larger unity, subject to the principle of indeterminacy: 'It is hard to understand the true function of a spectator, there and not there, ignored yet needed.'<sup>71</sup> The audience opens up to the actors in its desire 'to see more clearly into itself',<sup>72</sup> and in this way the play begins to act truly upon the audience. In opening itself up, the audience in turn begins to act upon the actors, if the quality of its perception allows of interaction. This explains why the global vision of a director can be annihilated by the presence of an audience, who expose the non-conformity between this vision and the structure of a theatrical event. The theatrical event is indeterminate, instantaneous, unforeseeable, even when it requires the combination of determined conditions. The role of the director consists in the lengthy and painstaking work of preparing the actors in order to allow the theatrical event to emerge. Any attempt to *foresee* the theatrical event is doomed to fail: the director cannot take the place of the audience. The triangle formed by the actor's inner vision, his relationship with his partners and the awareness of the audience can only occur at the moment of performance. The collective entity of the audience introduces the



reconciling element which is indispensable for the coming-to-be of the theatrical event. 'True activity (of the audience) can be invisible, but also indivisible.'<sup>73</sup>

Invisible though it is, this active participation on the part of the audience is nevertheless material and effective: 'When the Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *King Lear* toured through Europe the production was steadily improving . . . The quality of the attention that this audience brought expressed itself in silence and concentration: a feeling in the house that affected the actors as though a brilliant light were turned on their work.'<sup>74</sup> We can thus understand why Peter Brook's research is directed towards 'a necessary theatre, one in which there is only a practical difference between actor and audience, not a fundamental one'.<sup>75</sup> The space within which the interaction between audience and actors takes place is far more subtle than that of ideas, concepts, prejudices and conditioning. The quality of the attention of audience and actors makes it possible for the event to be generated in a plenary manifestation of spontaneity. Interaction occurs beyond the barriers of language and culture. The actors of the C.I.R.T. can communicate equally well with African villagers, Australian aborigines and the inhabitants of Brooklyn: 'Theatre isn't about narrative. Narrative isn't necessary. Events will make the whole.'<sup>76</sup>

I believe that a lot of the confusion surrounding the problem of 'spontaneity' springs from a linear, one-dimensional view of the theatrical event. One can quite easily believe in the existence of laws such as *Johakyū*, but this does not suffice to understand how a theatrical event can take place through the transition between the different elements of *Johakyū*. If one limits oneself to a strictly horizontal vision of the action of *Johakyū* (jo, the beginning, ha, the development, kyū, the end), it is impossible to understand, for example, how one can arrive at the heights of refinement at the 'ha' part of the 'ha', or at the heights of paroxysm at the 'kyū' part of the 'kyū': what is to furnish the necessary shocks for the movement not to stop, not to be blocked? How is one to reconcile the necessary continuity of a theatrical performance with the discontinuity inherent in the different parts which make it up? How is one to harmonise the progress of the play, the progress of the acting and the progress of the perception which is brought into being in the audience?

In other words, horizontal movement makes no sense in itself:

it always remains on the same level, nothing is gained from it. Such movement only acquires meaning if it is integrated in an *evolutionary* sense. It is as though every phenomenon in reality were subjected at every moment to two contradictory movements, two opposing directions, one upward and the other downward. It is as though there were two parallel rivers, flowing strongly in opposite directions. In order to go from one to the other, an outside intervention, a 'shock', is needed. It is at this juncture that the concept of 'discontinuity' is revealed in all its wealth of meaning.

But for the 'shock' to be effective, there must be a certain agreement, a certain overlapping between this 'shock' (which is itself subject to the law of Johakyū) and the system on which it is operating. We can thus understand why each element of the Johakyū must be made up in its turn of three other elements, why there must be a jo-ha-kyū sequence within the 'jo', the 'ha' and the 'kyū': the different constituents make it possible for there to be interaction between the different systems.

Thus, for a harmonious movement to exist, a new dimension must be present: the Johakyū acts not only horizontally but also vertically. If each element (jo, ha and kyū) is in turn made up of three other elements, we end up with nine elements, two of which represent a sort of 'interval': one of these is filled with the 'shock' which makes horizontal transition possible, and the other with the 'shock' which makes vertical transition possible. In this way we arrive at a vision of the action of Zeami's Johakyū which is very close to the precise mathematical formulation given by Gurdjieff to his 'law of Seven' or 'law of the octave'.<sup>77</sup>

If we ponder on this two-dimensional vision of the action of Johakyū, we are better able to understand Peter Brook's insistence on the primordial role of the audience in a theatrical event.

The audience can follow the suggestions made to them by the text of the play, the actors, the director. The first interval (between 'jo' and 'ha') can thus be crossed by a more or less automatic interchange, and the play can continue its horizontal movement.

But the audience also has its own irreducible presence, by reason of its culture, its feeling, its experiences of life, the quality of its attention, the intensity of its perception. A 'resonance' can be produced between the acting and the audience's inner life. The theatrical event can then

appear in all the fullness of its spontaneity, through a vertical interchange which implies a certain degree of willingness, of awareness, and it can lead on to something truly new, which did not exist before the theatrical performance. The ascent of the action of Johakyū to the summit of the play – the 'kyū' of the 'kyū' – can thus take place: the second interval is filled by a real 'shock' which enables continuity and discontinuity to coexist paradoxically.

We have been describing what could be viewed as a first level of perception in a theatrical event. We could refine this analysis by taking into account the endlessly branching structure of Johakyū. Different levels of perception, structured hierarchically in a qualitative 'ladder' could be discovered. There are degrees of spontaneity, as there are degrees of perception. The quality of a theatrical spectacle is determined by the effective presence of these degrees.

We also spoke of a vertical dimension in the action of Johakyū. This vertical direction involves two possible meanings, one ascending and evolutionary, the other descending and involutionary. The upward direction corresponds to a densification of energy, to a tendency towards unity in diversity, to an increase in awareness. This is the sense in which we have hitherto described the action of Johakyū. But it is perfectly easy to imagine a Johakyū in reverse, as it appears, for example, in the subject of Peter Brook's film *Lord of the Flies*, where we watch the progressive deterioration of Paradise to Hell. Nowhere does there exist an ideal, innocent place. Left to themselves, without the intervention of 'awareness', the laws of 'creation' lead inexorably to fragmentation, mechanisation, and in the final analysis to violence and destruction. Spontaneity is thus metamorphosed into mechanisation.

We should observe that 'spontaneity' and 'sincerity' are closely linked. The usual moral connotations of 'sincerity' signify its reduction to an automatic function based on a set of ideas and beliefs embedded in the psyche in an accidental manner over the course of time. In this sense, 'sincerity' becomes a lie in relation to itself. If we rid ourselves of the ballast of what does not belong to us, we can at last become 'sincere': acknowledge the laws, see ourselves, open ourselves to relationships with other people. This requires work and effort: 'sincerity must be learned'.<sup>78</sup> In relation to the usual idea of it, this 'sincerity' looks like 'insincerity'. 'With its moral overtones, the word causes great confusion,' says Peter Brook. 'In a way, the most powerful

feature of the Brecht actors is the degree of their *insincerity*. It is only through detachment that an actor will see his own clichés.<sup>79</sup> The actor inhabits the double space of false and true sincerity, in a fruitful transition between the two. 'He is called upon to be completely involved while distanced – detached without detachment. He must be sincere, he must be insincere: he must practise how to be insincere with sincerity and how to lie truthfully. This is almost impossible, but it is essential.'<sup>80</sup>

The actor's situation is reminiscent of Arjuna's perplexity at the advice given to him by Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, to reconcile action and non-action. Paradoxically, action which is accomplished in knowledge is non-action.

The actor is confronted at every moment with the choice between acting and not acting, between visible action for the audience and invisible action, connected with his inner life. Zeami drew attention to the importance of intervals of 'non-interpretation' which separate two gestures, two actions, two movements:

At the moment when the dance has stopped, or the chant has ceased, or indeed at any of those intervals that can occur during the performance of a role, or, indeed, during any pause or interval, the actor must never abandon his concentration but must keep his consciousness of that inner tension. It is this sense of inner concentration that manifests itself to the audience and makes the moment enjoyable . . . The actor must rise to a selfless level of art, imbued with a concentration that transcends his own consciousness, so that he can bind together the moments before and after that instant when 'nothing happens'. Such a process constitutes that inner force that can be termed 'connecting the arts through one intensity of mind'.<sup>81</sup>

It is only through being master of his attitudes and of the associations thus aroused that the actor can truly 'play a part', putting himself in the place of others. 'Every moment, associations change automatically, one evokes another and so on,' says Gurdjieff. 'If I am acting, I have to direct at every moment. It is impossible to leave it to momentum.'<sup>82</sup> In a sense, the free man is the man who can truly 'play a part'.

In the light of this, can one say that there is a close connection between theatrical work and spiritual work? Yes and no. A clear and important distinction needs to be made here between theatrical

research and traditional research, in order to avoid creating a series of harmful confusions of the sort that have already affected some of the attempts made by contemporary theatre.

Traditional research concerns man in his entirety, and involves a spectrum of events which is infinitely richer than that of theatrical research, whose aim is, after all, aesthetic. It is linked to an oral teaching which cannot be translated into ordinary language. It is not without significance that no traditional text ever really describes self-initiation. Gurdjieff was going to write about self-initiation in his 'third series', but, confronted with the impossibility of the task, he preferred to destroy the manuscript (what was published, *Life is Real only then, when 'I am'*, simply brings together fragments of this manuscript). Saint John of the Cross spoke several times of a treatise on the 'mystical marriage', but no trace has been found of such a treatise. Finally, Attar devotes most of his poem to the story of the discussions between the birds and to the description of the preparations for the journey, while the actual journey and the meeting with the Simorgh take up no more than a few lines.

Theatrical research clearly has another aim: art, the theatre. Peter Brook himself strongly emphasises the necessity for this distinction to be made: he speaks of 'the trap of believing that the theatre can become a substitute for a spiritual way of life'.<sup>83</sup> The theatrical experience is not enough to transform the life of the actor. But the actor can nevertheless have – like a scholar or any human being – a *fleeting* experience of what may be 'a higher level of evolution'. The theatre is an imitation of life, but an imitation based on the densification of energy which is released by the coming-to-be of the theatrical event. One can thus feel, through experiment, all the richness of the present moment. If the theatre is not really the decisive encounter with oneself and others, it nevertheless permits of a certain exploration.

This fundamental ambiguity is present in Grotowski's approach, as it is described by Peter Brook: '... like dancing or music in certain dervish orders, the theatre is a vehicle, a means for self-study, self-exploration.'<sup>84</sup> In Peter Brook's conception of it, the theatre cannot pretend to unity as its aim. It is certainly possible to experience certain privileged moments: 'At certain moments this fragmented world comes together, and for a certain time it can rediscover the marvel of organic life. The marvel of being one.'<sup>85</sup> But theatrical work is

impermanent, subject to the evolutionary or involutory influences of the environment. This impermanence does not prevent it from striving towards 'points of dynamic concentration'. In his reply to a question about *Orghast*, Peter Brook said of theatrical work that it is:

... self-destroying within waves ... You go through lines and points. The line that has gone through *Orghast* should come to a point, and the point should be a work ... obviously there is a necessary crystallizing of the work in general into a concentrated form. It's always about that, coming to points of concentration.<sup>86</sup>

*On the possibility of a universal language*

On being asked by A. C. H. Smith about the possibility of a 'universal language', Peter Brook waved the question aside as meaningless.<sup>87</sup> One senses in his response the fear that a vital question may be swamped by endless theoretical considerations, by abstractions which mutilate and deform. How many prejudices and clichés are automatically let loose by the simple utterance of the two words 'universal language'! And yet all Peter Brook's activity bears witness to his unending search for a new language which attempts to unite sound, gesture and word, thereby revealing meanings that cannot be approached otherwise. But this search is above all experimental: something vital emerges in theatrical space and it does not matter what it is called. 'What happens when gesture and sound turn into word?' muses Peter Brook. 'What is the exact place of the word in theatrical expression? As vibration? Concept? Music? Is any evidence buried in the sound structure of certain ancient languages?'<sup>88</sup>

The fact that words by themselves cannot furnish total access to reality has been known for a long time: all definition by means of words is based, in the last analysis, on non-defined terms. Where does linguistic determinism begin and end? Is it characterised by one value alone, by a finite number of values, or by an infinite number of values? And if, according to Korzybski's famous remark, 'a map is not the territory',<sup>89</sup> it nevertheless possesses the considerable advantage of having a structure similar to the structure of the territory. How is this similarity to become effective? '... the word is a small visible portion of a gigantic unseen formation', writes Peter Brook.<sup>90</sup> How does one gain access, starting from this 'small visible portion', to the whole universe?

As we have already said, a theatrical event determines the appearance

of a graded structure of different levels of perception. How can one single word embrace all these levels together?

The relativisation of vision enables us to define the place of a phenomenon in reality, and also to determine how it is *connected* with the rest. A word, gesture or action is connected to a certain level of perception, but in a true theatrical event they are also connected to the other levels present in the event. Relativity enables us to see the *invariability* concealed behind the multiplicity of the manifestation of phenomena in different systems of reference. This view of things is close to that implied by the 'principle of relativity' formulated by Gurdjieff.

Relativity conditions vision: without it, vision would not exist. The writer who takes his own reality as the whole of reality gives us an image of the world which is desiccated and dead, no matter how much 'originality' he shows: 'Unfortunately he rarely searches to relate his detail to any larger structure – it is as though he accepts without question his intuition as complete, his reality as all of reality . . .'<sup>92</sup> Death itself can be made relative by accepting contradiction, and as an example of this Peter Brook cites Chekhov: 'There is in Chekhov the permanent presence of death . . . This awareness of death and of the precious moments of living introduces a sense of the relative, that is to say a sufficient distance not to lose sight of the comic side of drama.'<sup>93</sup> Non-identification is another name for vision.

Theatrical work can be the unending search for the simultaneous perception on the part of actors and audience of all the levels which are present in an event. Peter Brook describes his own research in this lapidary formula:

. . . the simple relationship of movement and sound that passes directly, and the single element which has the ambiguity and density that permits it to be read off simultaneously on a multitude of levels. Those are the two points that research is all about.<sup>94</sup>

The principle of relativity throws light on what could eventually be a 'universal language'. For Gurdjieff, this new, exact, mathematical language must be centred on the idea of evolution: 'The fundamental property of the new language is that *all* ideas in it are concentrated round *one* idea, that is, they are taken in their mutual relationship from the point of view of one idea. This idea is the idea of *evolution*. Of course,

not evolution in the sense of *mechanical* evolution, because such an evolution does not exist, but in the sense of a conscious and volitional evolution, which alone is possible . . . The language in which understanding is possible is constructed upon the indication of the relation of the object under examination to the evolution possible for it, upon the indication of its *place* in the evolutionary ladder.<sup>95</sup> One could thus view the *sacred* itself as being all that is connected with evolution.

The new language involves the participation of feeling and of the body. Man in his totality, inasmuch as he is an image of reality, can thus create a universal language. He does not live only in the world of action and reaction, but also in the world of spontaneity and of the thought that knows itself.

Traditional symbolic language prefigures the new language. Speaking of the different systems which transmit the idea of unity, Gurdjieff says:

. . . a symbol can never be taken in a final definite meaning. In expressing the laws of the unity of endless diversity a symbol itself possesses an endless number of aspects from which it can be examined and it demands from the man approaching it the ability to see it simultaneously from different points of view. Symbols which are transposed into the words of ordinary language become rigid in them, they grow dim and very easily become 'their own opposites', confining the meaning within narrow dogmatic frames, without giving it even the very relative freedom of a *logical* examination of a subject. The cause of this is in the literal understanding of symbols, in attributing to a symbol a single meaning.<sup>96</sup>

The fact that a symbol possesses an indefinite number of aspects in no way means that it is imprecise. It is the very fact that it can be read on an indefinite number of levels that confers on it its extreme precision. Peter Brook, commenting on the theatre of Samuel Beckett, wrote:

Beckett's plays are symbols in the exact sense of the word. A false symbol is soft and vague: a true symbol is hard and clear. When we say 'symbolic' we often mean something drearily obscure: a true symbol is specific, it is the only form a certain truth can take . . . If we accept this, the symbol opens in us a great and wondering O.<sup>97</sup>

We can thus see why Peter Brook believes that the essential quality in Chekhov is 'precision', and why he says that today 'we look for



faithfulness, in a progression which consists in not leaving a single word vague'.<sup>98</sup> Words become effective, active, the vehicles of true meaning, and the actor behaves like a 'medium', allowing them to act through him rather than manipulating them.<sup>99</sup>

In forgetting about relativity, language has inevitably retreated into time; both its emotional and its intellectual capacity have diminished. It has of necessity 'prostituted itself': one word is taken to mean another, one meaning for another. The experience of Orghast has shown strikingly that a return to an organic language, freed from the infernal enslavement of one abstraction by another, is possible. The words invented by the poet Ted Hughes, the fragments acted in different ancient languages, acted as catalysts in the reciprocal transformation between movement and sound, as the expression of an inner state, of meanings which no longer needed to be filtered through the mental part. In an interview with *American Theatre*, Peter Brook emphasised that '... it is possible for actors, whatever their origin, to play intuitively a work in its original language. This simple principle is the most unusual thing that exists in the theatre.'<sup>100</sup>

It is obvious that the relativisation of vision requires hard work, considerable effort, an inner *silence* which is a sort of ascesis. Silence plays an important part in the work of Peter Brook, starting with his research on the relationship between silence and duration with his Theatre of Cruelty group in 1964, and ending with the rhythm punctuated by silences which is the indefinable but ever-present hallmark of his film *Meetings with Remarkable Men*: 'In silence there are many potentialities; chaos or order, muddle or pattern, all lie fallow – the invisible-made-visible is of sacred nature ...'<sup>101</sup> Silence is all embracing and contains many 'layers'.<sup>102</sup>

It could be said that events and silence are the fabric of all theatrical performances. The end of action is silence, as in *The Conference of the Birds*: 'A nice symbolic opposition is created between the black of the mourning material and the colours of the puppets. The colour disappears, the brightness fades, and silence is established,' as Georges Banu observed.<sup>103</sup> The richness of silence is unsettling, embarrassing, disquieting, but it conceals joy, that 'strange, irrational joy' that Peter Brook finds in the plays of Beckett.<sup>104</sup>

It is not accidental that the words 'empty space' are the title of the only book that Peter Brook has written about the theatre. The lesson of

Tradition has always been to create emptiness, to create silence within oneself, so as to allow all the potential of reality to grow up within one.

Does silence herald a real 'universal language'? In a passage from *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook writes: '... everything is a language for something and nothing is a language for everything'.<sup>105</sup> Is this 'nothing' – 'formlessness' or 'baselessness' as Jakob Böhme called it – the basis of all manifestation, all processes, all events? Also, how is one to reconcile the infinitely rich and formless silence with aesthetic form other than by continual searching and constant questioning: an endless, merciless questioning pursued on a razor's edge? It may be that what contemporary artistic research most lacks is 'tight-rope walkers':

We can try to capture the invisible but we must not lose touch with common sense . . . The model, as always, is Shakespeare. His aim continually is holy, metaphysical, yet he never makes the mistake of staying too long on the highest plane. He knew how hard it is for us to keep company with the absolute – so he continually bumps us down to earth . . . We have to accept that we can never see all of the invisible. So after straining towards it, we have to face defeat, drop down to earth, then start up again.<sup>106</sup>

On the road that he has chosen to take, Peter Brook must advance alone. There are neither 'models' nor 'sources' along such a road.

Following Korzybski,<sup>107</sup> we can divide the history of human thought roughly into three periods, basing this classification on the relationship between the observer and the observed. In the first, 'pre-scientific' period, the observer is all, and the observed is not important. In the second, 'classical' or 'semi-scientific' period, it is the observed alone which is important. This 'classical' vision still dominates most areas. Finally, in the third, 'scientific' period, which is still at the germinal stage, and of which Peter Brook seems to me to be a most intrepid explorer, we gradually find a knowledge emerging of the unity between observer and observed. The encounter with Tradition cannot but have an enriching and ennobling effect on this vision of unity. For the theatre, such an encounter is not abstract and intellectual but experimental. It could even be said that the theatre is the best field for the study of Tradition.

We may as well admit at the end of this study that we believe it impossible to approach Peter Brook's theatrical work from a theoretical

angle. All we can offer is one 'reading' amid a multitude of possible other 'readings'. In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook writes:

... most of what is called theatre anywhere in the world is a travesty of a word once full of sense. War or peace, the colossal bandwagon of culture trundles on, carrying each artist's traces to the evermounting garbage heap ... we are far too busy to ask the only vital question which measures the whole structure. Why theatre at all? What for? ... Has the stage a real place in our lives? What function can it have? What could it serve? ...<sup>108</sup>

These are questions that are still unanswered.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press 1985, vol. II.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brook in Gérard Montassier's *Le Fait Culturel*, Paris, Fayard 1980, p. 121.

<sup>3</sup> *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> So as to avoid confusion between the two definitions of 'tradition', we will write it with a capital T when referring to the second of the definitions (see text).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brook in *Le Fait Culturel*, op. cit., p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Pan Books 1978.

<sup>7</sup> The best introduction to Gurdjieff's thought is still P. D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1950.

<sup>8</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, op. cit., p. 250.

<sup>9</sup> Basarab Nicolescu, 'Physique contemporaine et Tradition occidentale', in *3e Millénaire*, no. 2, May-June 1982, pp. 4-13.

<sup>10</sup> For a study on the relationship between Gurdjieff's thought and contemporary scientific thinking see Basarab Nicolescu, 'Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff', in *Encyclopédie des sciences ésotériques*, Paris, Quillet (to be published).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Penguin Books 1976, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>13</sup> A. C. H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, Eyre Methuen 1972, p. 257.

<sup>14</sup> John Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds: the story of Peter Brook in Africa*, Penguin Books 1979, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff, *Views from the real World*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1976, p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Ervin Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World*, Blackwell 1972.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Brook in *Le Fait Culturel*, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> For an introduction to systems thinking, see Ervin Laszlo, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff, *All and Everything*, Harcourt Brace & Co., New York 1950.

<sup>23</sup> See A. C. H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, Eyre Methuen 1972; J. Heilpern, *Conference of the Birds: the story of Peter Brook in Africa*, Penguin Books 1979; M. Rostain, *Journal des répétitions de la tragédie de 'Carmen'*, manuscript, 1981.

- <sup>24</sup> M. Rostain, op. cit.
- <sup>25</sup> Peter Brook, in the programme notes for *Conference of the Birds*, Paris, C.I.C.T. 1979, p. 75.
- <sup>26</sup> M. Rostain, op. cit., p. 24.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 7.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 95.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 54.
- <sup>30</sup> A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 33.
- <sup>31</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 127.
- <sup>32</sup> Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity*, The International Non-Aristotelian Publishing Company, Lakeville, Connecticut, 1933, p. 161.
- <sup>33</sup> A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 255.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 123 (my italics).
- <sup>35</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 127.
- <sup>36</sup> See for example Stéphane Lupasco, *Les Trois Matières*, Strasbourg, Cohérence, 1982.
- <sup>37</sup> Farid ud-din Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, trans. C. S. Nott, The Curwen Press 1954, p. 5.
- <sup>38</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff, *All and Everything*, op. cit., p. 785.
- <sup>39</sup> Basarab Nicolescu, 'Unity and Exchange', in *Parabola*, New York, vol. IX, no. 4, 1984, pp. 26–33.
- <sup>40</sup> John Heilpern, op. cit., p. 136.
- <sup>41</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., pp. 14–15.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 124.
- <sup>43</sup> Charles S. Peirce, *Ecrits sur le signe*, rassemblés, traduits et commentés par Gérard Deledalle, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1978, pp. 23–24.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 22.
- <sup>45</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 111.
- <sup>46</sup> Peter Brook, in the programme notes for *The Cherry Orchard*, Paris, C.I.C.T., 1981, p. 109.
- <sup>47</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 18.
- <sup>48</sup> Peter Brook, interview with *The Times*, 29th August 1970, cited in A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., pp. 21–22.
- <sup>49</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 40.
- <sup>50</sup> Stéphane Lupasco, op. cit., p. 138.
- <sup>51</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 65.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 98.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 96.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 105.
- <sup>55</sup> *On the Art of Nō Drama – the Major Treatises of Zeami*, trans. J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu, Princeton University Press 1984, pp. 19–20.
- <sup>56</sup> See for example John Heilpern, op. cit., pp. 120–121.
- <sup>57</sup> Peter Brook, quoted in *Le Fait culturel*, op. cit., pp. 115–116.
- <sup>58</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff, *All and Everything*, op. cit., p. 354.
- <sup>59</sup> John Heilpern, op. cit., p. 69.
- <sup>60</sup> A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 250.
- <sup>61</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., pp. 12–13.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 132.
- <sup>63</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, op. cit., pp. 193–196.
- <sup>64</sup> M. Rostain, op. cit., p. 11.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 19.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

- <sup>67</sup> John Heilpern, op. cit., p. 50.
- <sup>68</sup> A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 108.
- <sup>69</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 154 (rehearsal, performance, attendance).
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 142.
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 57.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 152.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 144.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 25.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 150.
- <sup>76</sup> John Heilpern, op. cit., p. 165.
- <sup>77</sup> According to Gurdjieff, the number of fundamental laws which govern all the processes in the world and in man is very limited. In his cosmology, the fundamental laws are 'the law of Three' and the 'law of Seven', described at length in Ouspensky, op. cit.
- <sup>78</sup> Ouspensky, op. cit., p. 152.
- <sup>79</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 130.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 131.
- <sup>81</sup> *On the Art of Nō Drama*, op. cit., p. 97.
- <sup>82</sup> G. I. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World*, op. cit., pp. 177–178.
- <sup>83</sup> A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 251.
- <sup>84</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 66.
- <sup>85</sup> A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 52.
- <sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 264.
- <sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp. 255–256.
- <sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 42.
- <sup>89</sup> Alfred Korzybski, op. cit., p. 58.
- <sup>90</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 15.
- <sup>91</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, op. cit., p. 70.
- <sup>92</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 40.
- <sup>93</sup> Peter Brook in the programme notes for *The Cherry Orchard*, op. cit., p. 110.
- <sup>94</sup> A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 248.
- <sup>95</sup> P. D. Ouspensky, op. cit., pp. 70–71.
- <sup>96</sup> Ibid., pp. 283–284.
- <sup>97</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 65.
- <sup>98</sup> Peter Brook in the programme notes for *The Cherry Orchard*, op. cit., pp. 107–108.
- <sup>99</sup> A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 27.
- <sup>100</sup> Peter Brook, interview published in *American Theatre*, 1970–1971, cited in A. C. H. Smith, op. cit., p. 40.
- <sup>101</sup> Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, op. cit., p. 65.
- <sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 29.
- <sup>103</sup> Georges Banu, '“La Conférence des oiseaux” ou le chemin vers soi-même', in *Les Voies de la création théâtrale*, Paris, C.N.R.S. 1982, vol. X, p. 285.
- <sup>104</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 66.
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 133.
- <sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 69.
- <sup>107</sup> Alfred Korzybski, op. cit., p. 99.
- <sup>108</sup> Peter Brook, op. cit., p. 69.

# A Story about Humanity

The Mahabharata conceived by Peter Brook

JEAN MAMBRINO

'If you were to tell this story to an old stick, it would sprout roots and leaves again.'

Henri Michaux

The Sanscrit word *maha* means both 'great' and 'total'. *Bharata* corresponds to a family name, but by extension it means 'Hindu', and in an even more general sense 'Man'. What we have here, then, is a general history of humanity in the form of a sacred epic whose legendary course, which takes it into the realm of the universal, is compounded of realism, magic, religion and poetry.

All Vedic wisdom is thus contained in this book, the longest in the world (one hundred thousand stanzas, twelve thousand pages, fifteen times the length of the Bible) and one of the most ancient: it is five thousand years since Shrila Visadeva gave written form to the fabulous legend from which the spirit itself of India has breathed for century upon century. But it is also our common history, full of sound and fury, and at the heart of it is the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the sacred text *par excellence*, which among other things teaches us that 'death does not exist'.<sup>1</sup>

For ten years Peter Brook has been working on a play based on the *Mahabharata*, with the help of his colleague Jean-Claude Carrière. But he has dreamed of it since 1966, when he heard about the epic for the first time during rehearsals for a performance about the Vietnam war. He did not know how to begin, and a young Indian visitor described to him the scene out of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (which Brook had never even heard of) in which a great warrior, at the moment of confronting the opposing army, stops and asks himself: 'Why should we fight?' It is curious (or perhaps not so curious) that chance should have presented Peter Brook first and foremost with what is in a sense the occult centre of the epic, the spiritual mainspring of its varied story.

We should now go on to tell of the birth of the whole enterprise, the

decisive meeting with the great story-teller Philippe Lavastine, the true revealer of the richness of this work; the five journeys to India, the long writing of the text, the twenty-five weeks of rehearsal with actors from all over the world, the various dress-rehearsals preceding the world premiere in the quarries of Boulbon during the Avignon festival, to be repeated in November at the Bouffes du Nord. Such an undertaking, which in some sense goes beyond even the theatre, seems to me to merit a degree of attention worthy of the effort put into it.

So my aim here is to provide as much information and material for reflection as possible, which I have taken from the participants and the various actors in the enterprise, starting with the master of ceremonies himself, since this is the synthesis of his life's work in theatrical research.<sup>2</sup> I have taken the main quotations which follow from a long interview he gave with *le Monde* and from the remarkable issue of the Belgian journal *Alternatives théâtrales* which is devoted to the subject, but which it is difficult to find commercially in France.<sup>3</sup>

The first difficulty that presented itself was the scope of this 'great poem of the world', as it calls itself, of a richness and complexity unprecedented in the theatre. The conflict which divides the five brothers of the Pandavas family from their first cousins the Kauravas (a new and gigantic version of the antagonism between Cain and Abel) forms the axis of the epic, onto which are grafted innumerable and endlessly proliferating digressions. This family quarrel, which breaks out and develops in connection with the government of the world, culminates in a huge battle in which the fate of the entire universe is at stake. Jean-Claude Carrière has reduced the massive amount of material to three plays which last about nine hours altogether – three evenings or one night – and which he summarises as follows:

The first play, *The Game of Dice*, tells of the fabulous origins of the characters, the birth and childhood of the heroes, the first violence and the unequal division of the kingdom. It ends with the famous game of dice during which the fate of the kingdom is decided. The second play, *Exile in the Forest*, shows the years of obscurity, the almost inevitable escalation of danger, and how both sides acquire weapons of extermination. It also shows a world which is masked, unrecognizable, and the sometimes immense efforts made by the sages to keep the peace. But everything points to the end of

the world. It is in the third play, *The War*, that the *Bhagavad-Gita* or 'Song of the joyful' is written, which is Krishna's own response to one of the characters before the start of battle. Then the heroes die one after the other, in the course of some extraordinary scenes, and the victors remain alone on an almost empty earth. After the war, a happy reign of thirty-five years precedes the ascent to Paradise, which is the 'inconceivable region'.

Indian tradition says: Everything which is in the *Mahabharata* is somewhere else. What is not in it is nowhere.

'If you listen to this story,' says the poet Vasya, 'you will be someone else at the end of it; you will be changed into a better person.' Jean-Claude Carrière confirms this: 'It is a poem which does you good,' and this is not the least paradox about this terrible tale of life and death: the fact that it can guide those who hear it towards peaceful illumination not only through self-knowledge, but through a sort of strange transformation.

Peter Brook has been careful to avoid creating an Indian play, by working ceaselessly to attain to the universality of myth and legend.

At the start (he says) the *Mahabharata* appears to be only about gods; it gives the impression of being an imaginary, bewitching tale, which basically does not concern us. Then, there is a descent. Little by little the mythical characters are rooted in the earth, enter into conflicts of ambition, situations of crisis. This turns into theatre, into war. Nothing mythical or romantic about it. We are in touch with the truth of violence, of suffering, the same old war: the *Mahabharata* belongs to our own time.

In this way we go beyond the anecdotal and the entertaining, and also beyond the aesthetic. Both the strength and the beauty of the play constantly bring us back to what is inner and essential, through a host of concrete situations.

For an Indian, harmony with oneself begins with harmony with the universe. In the *Mahabharata* there is war, the incomprehensible impulse to slaughter, but there is also, and always, a profound appeal to the understanding of each of us. The heroes have constantly to situate themselves in relation to an above and a below, to see further than the shock of events, in an absolute absence of illusion, since all is illusion.



'Except for thought,' Jean-Claude Carrière is careful to say, adding, 'Here, hell is the self, not others.'

The acted war is always shown full face, without involving the audience. It is the war in the world of all time, but it possesses several levels, and some episodes seem to be magnified, like a close-up in the cinema. But there is always distance, magnificent stylisation, full illumination. 'I did away with the business of keeping the actor in the dark, because it seems to me to be completely destructive to be deprived of real contact with the actor's face.'<sup>4</sup>

There is an atmosphere of great freedom about the stage from the beginning: the storyteller is in fact telling the story to a child (not, as in the original epic, to the young king to teach him how to confront the future). The presence of the little boy introduces a total and universal freedom: he listens, he asks questions, suspended and calm; he is open, curious, impassioned, fearless. He is you, me, each one of us, a part of ourselves which is without frontiers and almost without origin. The terrible gravity and solemnity of this story become simple and familiar. I thought of Heidegger's words in his *Experience of Thought*: 'The magnificence of what is simple.' The *Mahabharata* thus tells a story as sombre and tragic as our own story today, but in a way which is neither negative nor pessimistic, as it is in Spengler. There is neither despair nor revolt. As Brook observes, it reveals 'a way of living in a catastrophic world without losing touch with what enables man to live and fight in a positive manner'. And he specifies: 'The *Mahabharata* does not suggest a solution. Collective and individual Destiny are announced at each moment by Krishna, the man-god, who is busy preventing war while continually saying that it will come: a challenge to awareness, but not negative like fatalism.'

Everyone must discover his mission, the only way to fulfil his dharma – the task for which he has been born. And sometimes, like the god, it is necessary to cheat, not to respect the dharma, in order to fulfil it in a subtle way, as in the episode when Krishna uses a lie almost against himself. At the end of the exile in the forest, every Pandava must choose a disguise which corresponds to his profoundest thought. Thus Arjuna, the greatest warrior in the world, and a very attractive person who loves life, nature and love, chooses to disguise himself as a woman and to appear as a transvestite, thereby revealing the secret, feminine part of his nature (*gentile* is the word used by Vittorio Mezzogiorno, the actor

who plays him) – revealing, perhaps, his impossible dream, which he will realise by making war without loving it!<sup>5</sup>

Here let us make a little digression, inspired by Jean-Claude Carrière, like those which occur at every turn in the epic. It is on two levels. First there is a reminder of the scene, famous throughout India, which takes place just before the battle in which the fate of the world is at stake. Krishna offers Arjuna, the sublime warrior, a magnificent and perilous choice: Do you want all my army, a hundred thousand soldiers armed for battle, or me, Krishna, alone and weaponless? Arjuna does not hesitate. He chooses Krishna and asks him to be his *charioteer*. He wants, not enormous strength, but a wise guide, a driver for his chariot.

A second story, also told by Carrière, is grafted onto this one, whose spiritual atmosphere wonderfully illuminates the whole play. An Indian sage visiting Mont Saint-Michel noticed that visitors placed candles before the image of the Saint on his horse, piercing the dragon which is vomiting flames. He wished to light three candles, to people's astonishment. One candle was for the saint, of course; but there was one for the dragon, for how can one kill one's own flame, the consuming fire without which there is neither energy nor desire? And the third candle, naturally, is for the horse, for one must not forget the horse. And the swami was surprised at the surprise of all those good devout people. This is the spirit of the *Mahabharata*.

The unique splendour of the play staged at Avignon was first and foremost due, of course, to its setting – the Callet quarry at Boulbon – where the semicircle of stone under the great dome of the breezy star-filled night formed a backdrop of great majesty, worthy of the ancient theatre.<sup>6</sup> The four elements were present from beginning to end. There was the free air, of course; there was the earth covered in golden sand; there was the fire burning on different hearths, or multiplied in tiny candles at ground level, or twisting like a blue serpent of flame; and finally there was the ever-present water. At the back a stream flowed along the whole length of the stage, echoed by a large pool in front and to the right of the stage, near the front row of the audience.

The play of water and fire (torches were extinguished in it, or small lighted cups floated on the surface) is enormously rich in symbolism, a symbolism far more complex and profound than in Tarkovski's *Nostalgia*. At times it is used realistically, at others in a sacred sense. At the

beginning, water is part of ritual or magic. At the end it is the image of disaster. If the stream at the back is reminiscent of the world of India, the pool is universal. At the end they are united.

On a path carved out high up in the wall of stone, silhouettes are seen to move, and at the beginning of each play there sounds the wild and solemn call of the *nagaswaram*, whose plaintive, trumpet-like sonority is so penetratingly pure.<sup>7</sup> The production and the acting, inventive without ostentation, reveal the same discretion and depth. The props are forgotten, in spite of the power of the battle scenes or the subtle splendour of the lighting, whose beauty is as it were invisible, like the gestures and movements of each actor. Everything proceeds from a sort of *natural inwardness*.<sup>8</sup>

Twenty-three actors and five musicians bring the universe together with their mixture of nations and races. Some of them are famous in their own countries, such as Vittorio Mezzogiorno whom I mentioned above, or Andrzej Seweryn, the well-known Polish actor. There is also Brook's old Japanese colleague, Yoshi Oida, a Nō master, and Sotigui Kouyate, the giant from Mali who comes from Ouagadougou, witch-doctor, singer-composer, film actor, employed by the Ministry of Labour in his own country, and who has also played football against the French team! The other actors (Arabic, French American, Greek, though only one Indian actress) recreate, with their different accents, the language of the whole earth, the mysterious initial impulse, as though rediscovering a forgotten memory. Each of them is seeking the *god in man and man in god*, as Vittorio Mezzogiorno puts it, for 'you must be both yourself and something else, the divine part of yourself' says Sotigui Kouyate, who plays Bhishma. The death of this character is slow and serene as though there were no separation, no rupture, between the two states. Sotigui Kouyate, who is a non-practising believer in his own faith, says of it: 'Bhishma is giving all the time, even on his deathbed. He has waited for the universal destruction in order to show, through the story of the drop of honey, man's attachment to life: even on the verge of death, man is tempted by a drop of honey and forgets his danger. The taste for living is alive in him up to the end.'

The performance of his death (which takes up a few minutes of this vast spectacle) may serve as an example of the rare *spiritual* quality that imbues the whole. Bhishma, whose immortality – which he has acquired through asceticism – is an obstacle to victory, agrees to die at

the hand of Arjuna, his most perfect disciple. He stands on the left of the stage, dressed in long white robes. On the right, Arjuna bends his bow, which is without a string.<sup>9</sup> Between the two stands Krishna, smiling. He approaches Arjuna, takes the arrow between two fingers at the moment when the bow is released, and very slowly carries the slender shaft 'which vibrates, flies and does not fly' to the heart of Bhishma. He does this extremely slowly, with a smile. A few seconds, an infinite time, a sustained flash of lightning, as though produced by the divine smile. Thus death becomes pure expectation, visible and invisible, present and already past. This is the greatest poetry that the theatre can know.<sup>10</sup>

One day, Dhritarashtra meets the *eternal young man* ('very young and very old'), and asks him to explain what he means by saying that *death does not exist*. He replies:

Death is carelessness it is ignorance it is like a tiger hidden in the grass we create children for death but death does not devour the man who has shaken off its dust it is powerless against eternity the wind life come from the infinite the moon drinks the breath of life the sun drinks the moon the infinite drinks the sun the sage flies amidst the worlds when his body is destroyed when no trace of it is left it is death itself which is destroyed he contemplates the infinite . . .

And the *eternal young man* withdraws, 'as though he had merely passed by'.

This is how the *Mahabharata* passes, how ten years pass, and the long night, and the ephemeral spectacle, which for once cannot be destroyed.

From *Études*, November 1985

Translated by Liadain Sherrard

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The *Mahabharata* is still at the heart of cultural activity in India and Indonesia. Many of its episodes are acted, danced, sung and mimed even in the remotest villages. This is the first time, however, that a complete stage version has been attempted.
- <sup>2</sup> The various productions that he has staged over the last ten years were themselves influenced by the work he was secretly doing at the same time on the *Mahabharata*, notably the *Iks*, *Ubu*, *Carmen*, and the unforgettable *Conference of the Birds* (cf. *Études*, December 1979, p. 651).
- <sup>3</sup> *Le Monde* 27th June 1985, and *Alternatives théâtrales* 24 July 1985 (quarterly review, 18 place du Châtelain, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium).
- <sup>4</sup> This remark of Brook's seems to me of supreme importance in the face of all the inauspicious trends which I have frequently bemoaned in my 'Carnets'. See, for example, what I wrote on the production of the *Combat de nègres et de chiens* by Chéreau at Nanterre (*Études*, June 1983, pp. 795–796). This applies also to those megalomaniac productions whose huge proportions reduce the actors to tiny shapes whose faces fade into the distance. 'A theatre which is as though you were at the cinema,' proclaimed Robert Hossein. This is a deplorable remark which demonstrates an exceedingly crude appreciation of both the theatre and the cinema.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. the words of Saint-Exupéry shortly before his last air mission, from which he never returned: 'Victory will go to those who have made war without loving it.'
- <sup>6</sup> But Maurice Bénichou, an admirable Krishna, assures me that the spectacle will be even more beautiful after November, in the red cave of the Bouffes du Nord: less realistic, more mysteriously involved with the depths of the imagination. As it is in fact.
- <sup>7</sup> An entire article is needed to describe the place and the quality of the music, neither Indian nor European, which comes in discreetly, powerfully and with subtlety at the key moments of the play – a far cry from the continuous hammering so dear to the Théâtre du Soleil.
- <sup>8</sup> This is how Jean Kalman, director of lighting, describes his work: 'I have been using amber, blue and green. This last colour, both on stage and in the memory, produces the sometimes unconscious effect of making one feel the colour without perceiving the light as coloured. It is like the spices one uses to give relish to a dish. The colours I use are chosen in such a way that the eye very quickly integrates them as non-colours . . .'
- <sup>9</sup> The mime of drawing a bow which is so often performed in the course of the play (there is no bowstring and the arrow is, as it were, juggled) is a miracle of simplicity and clarity. It was discovered after endless research during rehearsals, almost by chance, when someone imitated a childish gesture.
- <sup>10</sup> Danièle Vallenave has analysed this scene and this production expertly in *Alternatives théâtrales* 24.

## WENDELL BERRY

## Sabbaths, 1983

## I

In a crease of the hill  
Under the light,  
Out of the wind,  
As warmth, bloom, and song  
Return, lady, I think of you,  
And of myself with you.  
What are we but forms  
Of the self-acknowledging  
Light that brings us  
Warmth and song from time  
To time? Lip and flower,  
Hand and leaf, tongue  
And song, what are we but welcomers  
Of that ancient joy, always  
Coming, always passing?  
Mayapples rising  
Out of old time, leaves  
Folded down around  
The stems, as if for flight,  
Flower bud folded in  
Unfolding leaves, what  
Are we but hosts  
Of times, of all  
The Sabbath morning shows,  
The light that finds it good.

## II

The year relents, and free  
Of work, I climb again  
To where the old trees wait,  
Time out of mind. I hear  
Traffic down on the road,  
Engines high overhead.  
And then a quiet comes,  
A cleft in time, silence  
Of metal moved by fire;  
The air holds little voices,

Titmice and chickadees,  
 Feeding through the treetops  
 Among the new small leaves,  
 Calling again to mind  
 The grace of circumstance,  
 Sabbath economy  
 In which all thought is song,  
 All labor is a dance.  
 The world is made at rest,  
 In ease of gravity.  
 I hear the ancient theme  
 In low world-shaping song  
 Sung by the falling stream.  
 Here where a fallen log  
 Has slowed the flow: a shelf  
 Of dark soil, level laid  
 Above the tumbled stones.  
 Roots fasten it in place.  
 It will be here a while;  
 What holds it here decays.  
 A richness from above,  
 Brought down, is held, and holds  
 A little while in flow.  
 Stem and leaf grow from it.  
 At cost of death, it has  
 A life. Thus falling founts,  
 Unmaking makes the world.

### III

Now though the season warms  
 The woods inherits harms  
 Of human enterprise.  
 Our making shakes the skies  
 And taints the atmosphere.  
 We have ourselves to fear.  
 We burn the world to live;  
 Our living blights the leaf.  
  
 A clamor high above  
 Entered the shadowed grove,  
 Withdrew, was still, and then  
 The water thrush began

The song that is a prayer,  
 A form made in the air,  
 That all who live here pray,  
 The Sabbath of our day.

May our kind live to breathe  
 Air worthy of the breath  
 Of all singers that sing  
 In joy of their making,  
 Light of the risen year,  
 Songs worthy of the ear  
 Of breathers worth their air,  
 Of makers worth their hire.

#### IV

Who makes a clearing makes a work of art,  
 The true world's Sabbath trees in festival  
 Around it. And the stepping stream, a part  
 Of Sabbath also, flows past, by its fall  
 Made musical, making the hillslope by  
 Its fall, and still at rest in falling, song  
 Rising. The field is made by hand and eye,  
 By daily work, by hope outreaching wrong,  
 And yet the Sabbath, parted, still must stay  
 In the dark mazes of the soil no hand  
 May light, the great life, broken, make its way  
 Along the stemmy footholds of the ant.  
     Bewildered in our timely dwelling place,  
     Where we arrive by work, we stay by grace.



## Sabbaths, 1984

### I

Over the river in loud flood,  
 In the wind deep and broad  
 Under the unending sky, pair  
 By pair, the swallows again,  
 With tender exactitude,  
 Play out their line  
 In arcs laid on the air,  
 As soon as made, not there.

### II

A tired man leaves his labor, felt  
 In every ligament, to walk  
 Alone across the new-mowed field,  
 And at its bound, the last cut stalk,

He takes a road much overgone  
 In time by bearers of his name,  
 Though now where foot and hoof beat stone  
 And passed to what their toil became,

Trees stand that in their long leaf-fall,  
 Untroubled on forgiving ground,  
 Have buried the sledged stone with soil  
 So that his passing makes no sound.

He turns aside, and joins his quiet  
 Forebears in absence from that way.  
 He passes through the dappled light  
 And shadow that the breeze makes sway

Upon him and around him as  
 He goes. Within the day's design  
 The leaves sway, darkly, or ablaze  
 Around their edges with a line

Of fire caught from the sun. He steps  
 Amid a foliage of song  
 No tone of which has passed his lips.  
 Watching, silent, he shifts among

The shiftings of the day, himself  
 A shifting of the day's design  
 Whose outline is in doubt, unsafe,  
 And dark. One time, less learned in pain,

He thought the earth was firm, his own,  
 But now he knows that all not raised  
 By fire, by water is brought down.  
 The slope his fields lie on is poised

Above the river in mere air,  
 The breaking forewall of a wave,  
 And everything he has made there  
 Floats lightly on that fall. To save

What passes is a passing hope  
 Within the day's design outlawed.  
 His passing now has brought him up  
 Into a place not reached by road,

Beyond all history that he knows,  
 Where trees like great saints stand in time,  
 Eternal in their patience. Loss  
 Has rectified the songs that come

Into this columned room, and he  
 Only in silence, nothing in hand  
 Comes here. A generosity  
 Is here by which the fallen stand.

In history many-named, in time  
 Nameless, this generosity conveys  
 The answering to the asking rhyme  
 Among confusions that dispraise

The membering name that Adam spoke  
 By gift, and then heard parcelled out  
 Among all fallen things that croak  
 And cry and sing and curse and shout.

The foliage opens like a cloud.  
 At rest high on the valley side,  
 Silent, the man looks at the loud  
 World: road and farm, his daily bread,

His beasts, his garden, and his barns,  
 His trees, the white walls of his house,  
 Whose lives and hopes he knows. He yearns  
 Toward all his work has joined. What has

He by his making made but home,  
 A present help by passing grace  
 Allowed to creatures of his name  
 Here in this passing time and place?

### III

The crop must drink, we move the pipe  
 To draw the water back in time  
 To fall again upon the field,  
 So that the harvest may grow ripe,  
 The year complete its ancient rhyme  
 With other years, and a good yield  
 Complete our human hope. And this  
 Is Sunday work, necessity  
 Depriving us of needed rest.  
 Yet this necessity is less,  
 Being met, not by one, but three.  
 Neighbors, we make this need our feast.

### IV

The summer ends, and it is time  
 To face another way. Our theme  
 Reversed, we harvest the last row  
 To store against the cold, undo  
 The garden that will be undone.  
 We grieve under the weakened sun  
 To see all earth's green fountains dried,  
 And fallen all the works of light.  
 You do not speak, and I regret  
 This downfall of the good we sought  
 As though the fault were mine. I bring  
 The plow to turn the shattering  
 Leaves and bent stems into the dark,  
 From which they may return. At work,  
 I see you leaving our bright land,  
 The last cut flowers in your hand.

## V

Estranged by distance, he relearns  
The way to quiet not his own,  
The light at rest on tree and stone,  
The high leaves falling in their turns,

Spiralling through the air made gold  
By their slow fall. Bright on the ground,  
They wait their darkening, commend  
To coming light the light they hold.

His own long comedown from the air  
Complete, safe home again, absence  
Withdrawing from him tense by tense  
In presence of the resting year,

Blessing and blessed in this result  
Of times not blessed, now he has risen.  
He walks in quiet beyond division  
In surcease of his own tumult.

# Chapters from Flagman, What of the Road?

A novel

V. S. YANOVSKY

I saw a child carrying a light.  
I asked him where he had brought it from.  
He put it out, and said:  
'Now you tell me where it is gone.'

Hamasa

## One INTROIT

Midgard, the young Priestess, and two elderly women entered the condemned man's cell. As tradition prescribed they had been called to weep with him and to prepare him for the great transfer.

For in those parts men did not die like dogs. With the weepers' help the suffering souls were made to recall anything of importance that had happened to them in the past, even if this meant prolonging the agony. Later, they would not have the needed faculties at their command for remembering those earthly experiences, and how, without full consciousness, could one expect to stand the ultimate trial and face the Supreme Judge?

'But it is not enough to remember,' the sobbing Priestess said, 'one must also forget what is superfluous. To resurrect the meaningful involvements, you must shake off all petty distractions, wash away the dust from your soul and burn out old festering wounds.' Here the three women began to weep so desperately that the prisoner meekly joined in, repeating over and over, 'Oh misery, oh mercy.'

'Do you remember,' Midgard continued, her eyes shining, but each shining with a different light, 'do you remember, Hetman, that before you came to us the first time, you dove into our wonderful bay full of

multicoloured underwater formations, and how, in that instant, you spontaneously decided to live a new life?

'Yes, I remember,' he said, and broke into loud sobs; the three women, too, cried in unison. 'But tell me, why must I die? Because I killed that traitor? Or because I loved my Cheetah and refused Elma?'

'Don't think about the execution,' Midgard advised. 'Now you must account for everything important in your past, happy or sad, so that you can start your next existence free of all that weight.'

'Our time is short, soon they'll come for you!' the two weepers, Yagna and Agnes, lamented.

'This is more important than extreme unction,' Midgard urged. 'Do you remember the night you met the girl whom you called Cheetah, knowing full well that that was not her Christian name?'

Indeed, yes. He remembered his return to the village, and he also remembered that during that night he felt as if he had already once before lived through it all and knew the fatal ending. First he was drinking bootlegged brandy with one woman, then with another and a third, who casually entered the house. He gave them some pre-war coins, upon which they promptly left, as if acknowledging that he was not for them. Then a girl, whom he immediately recognised, came up to his table. He could not tell from where she had appeared, perhaps she simply materialised out of the fog, the noise of the tide and the smell of sawdust with which the floor was covered like in a circus.

'No coins for me?' she inquired with a familiar smile.

'I have none left and, anyhow, you deserve better than this money,' he answered, rising. He removed a cross on a heavy chain from his neck and, holding it out to the girl, said: 'Here is my mother's blessing,' fastening the chain around her soft waist.

Unlike the other girls she looked Hetman full in the face. Her eyes were dark and brilliant – each with a different flame: as if the rays from one were mirrored in the other, thus giving each a double (or triple) source of light. It was awesome and enchanting to watch the play of those changing colours, and he remembered Sulamith from the Song of Songs (though to his knowledge he had never seen Sulamith).

She stood motionless at the table. Neither of them spoke, their lips open in an astonished smile and their eyes grave, even frightened. It was as if in an arid desert a flower had suddenly sprung up in full bloom; a moment ago they both had been like dead – he a deserter,

wanted for murder, she a seduced nun escaped from the monastery – and now it seemed they were sanctified, joined forever by a superior power.

‘You know, of course, that we were already united several times,’ she said solemnly. ‘As man and woman, tiger and tigress, Sun and Moon, you and me.’

‘No need,’ he took up slowly, ‘telling you about the deer I once captured for you in the forest. No need, I guess, to remind you of the hurricane that for forty days kept us prisoners in a cave, drowning not in the waters but in love.’

‘In saintly passion!’ she corrected him.

‘Cheetah, where are our cubs?’

‘Cheetah?’ She was surprised. ‘I thought you were a lion.’

‘No, I was a snow leopard.’

‘Do they then mate with cheetahs?’ she wondered.

‘I chose you among all of God’s creatures.’

‘Yes, that is right, there once was someone, ages ago, who called me Cheetah.’

She came closer and put her arms around his neck. And as she kissed him, the odour of the austere monastery (and the army barracks) that their spare bodies exhaled mingled, an odour of voluntary poverty and biological abundance, and also of a sawdust-covered circus arena where tigers and lions entertain children on a Sunday afternoon.

This smell of childhood and innocence made them remember the time past, and she began to weep bitterly.

‘What ails thee, Cheetah?’ he asked, in tears himself.

‘I was happy,’ she answered, ‘and if I had died years ago I would have remained happy forever.’

‘I am ready to pay my dues, Cheetah!’

‘So you will perish here!’

She looked like a unicorn that has lost its path and strayed to the outskirts of a hostile city – curious and subdued.

‘Cheetah,’ he said, ‘we were together in the woods. I brought you meat and you nursed our cubs.’

‘I thought you were an itinerant monk who entered my cell through the window, an opening as narrow as a needle’s eye.’

‘Yes,’ he sadly conceded, ‘I must have been a monk, some lives ago.’

‘Do you believe we can still do penance? that God will accept it?’

And without waiting for an answer she led him up one flight to her room, her eyes shining, feeding on each other's mirrored light.

'This village needs men to fight the reds. I'll help your peasants to victory before I die,' he vowed.

'Yes, let us die together. For me alone it is difficult: in the evening I say – tomorrow, but when morning comes I am so distracted that the day is wasted again.'

Her bed was centuries old, with a blue silken canopy, and with curtains all around to facilitate concentration – in love making or in prayer.

## TWO REGIONAL HISTORY

### 1

An educated historian visiting all the spots along or close to the Adriatic and the Mediterranean where colonies of old gnostics, such as the Bogomils, Albigenses, Cathars, Manicheans and Mazdaists, settled, would surely notice that most of the villages were nothing but stone fortresses, usually with a no longer inhabitable castle on the very top, which centuries ago served as the last stronghold against the conventional Christian churches. These churches attacked the heretics, pillaged, raped, burned and crucified, but still could not annihilate their spirit – a miracle which perhaps speaks for itself. God, or the two Gods whom these people worshipped, protected them in earnest, although numerous were their martyrs and cruel the end of the believers. Indeed, the Gods had always inspired them so well that the concept of dualism, of the contradiction between matter and spirit, which was the basis of their ancient theology, had even crept into the Gospel and could never be entirely eradicated.

Their settlements spread towards both seas, reaching on one side Spain, on the other Greece and the Balkans. From those stony beaches, terraces led up, step by step, to villages with small houses; somewhere in the centre a beautiful plaza with a fountain, tiny yet majestic thanks to its Pythagorean proportions; several wells, scattered in different places, fed from mountain springs; stone walls, bearing the marks of cannon balls; underground communications like in an ant hill . . . Then, farther up, reached by yet more narrow stone stairs, a sort of monastery with a chapel, sometimes of Asian or Moslem architecture, and finally the old



castle, still impressive even in its ruined state, with a contemporary house or cottage erected in the back by the current Lords whose ancestors had for centuries repulsed zealous Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Lutherans, Calvinists and other eager saviours.

Such too was the village which we are about to visit. During the Second World War it prospered in a way, that is, it was left alone, for neither the Germans and Italians nor the Yugoslavs, Greeks or Albanians felt like risking a company of fighting men for an ant hill famous for its stubbornness but otherwise without any strategic or economic value. Immediately after the armistice, however, the victorious reds decided to subdue this patriarchal enclave and re-educate its people. Thus a long and futile campaign of attrition began, since no enlightened commander familiar with the history of the place would dare carry out a frontal attack. The siege dragged on, for the villagers had adequate supplies including hardware at their disposal and, being vegetarians with an inclination for fasting, did not need much to survive. All they really lacked was water. The few wells, connected to a source high in the hills, never yielded more than a limited amount, barely sufficient for their drinking needs. Even in peace time, water for the livestock and other purposes had to be brought up from the river that rushed down the mountains to the sea below.

Most of the wells were fed directly through underground channels, and now, having gained this information, the enemy successfully blocked them. So a new approach to the mountain stream had to be opened up. This was already done in previous centuries, but the underground tunnels, corridors and shafts had become impenetrable and would have to be cleared, shored and secured again.

In the monastery, next to the castle with the ruined but still impressive walls, lived the Perfect, the spiritual leader of the community. For at least fifty years this elder ruled the monastery, a task more difficult than one would imagine, for the monks and nuns could indulge in marriage or, rather, concubinate. (According to the local teachings, marriage was not a sacrament, since life on this earth, within the accursed body, was sinful throughout.) Even the Perfect, or Blessed as he was also called, had a wife, much younger than he, by the name of Abishag.

Several years ago two girls had come to the village. The girls' parents had been killed by one or another brand of patriots, and the children,

Abishag, fifteen, and Midgard, eight, were brought to their uncle, the Blessed. He took Abishag for his spiritual wife (whatever that meant). The younger, who showed a definite inclination for severe monastic discipline, was installed in a small cottage within the gates of the monastery, there, as tradition had it, locked up all alone, food and drink dispensed to her through a small window (except on some feast days, when she joined the congregation). All this in preparation for the exalted office of Priestess – women Perfects having been accepted and even cultivated there since time immemorial.

During the years that followed, Midgard became so immersed in prayers and theology that on the most holy days the entire village would congregate beneath her window, to follow her comments on the Scriptures. At such times she kept vigil with the Perfect and Abishag, participating in the high services of the monastery, though she was not yet allowed to live there.

Eagerly, Midgard pursued this life. For seven years she lived in serene abstinence. But then the inevitable happened. The serpent appeared one night under her window, in the image of a young, itinerant monk who had stopped at the monastery. He began, first, to pray, sing hymns, read the Scriptures with her, then, to talk, touch and kiss.

## 2

The story of this monk was not uncommon, considering his origins. Hetman was born in the Caucasus, in a valley hemmed in by mountains, where angry, turbulent rivers coursed far below in the dark, shaking the high cliffs and boulders twenty-four hours a day. The nearby monastery belonged to a sect of Christian believers who held Lucifer in high esteem. In fact they dated back to the dawn of elaborate cults, to the times of Mazdazean and Parsi revelations, and only much later, under the influence of audacious priests, accepted Christ as Redeemer. Hetman, the seventh son and therefore completely superfluous in his household, entered the monastery at a very young age, planning in due course to set out on a long journey, as many of his fellow-monks had done before.

All through his youth he staunchly avoided love entanglements. As soon as a girl looked at him, in the chapel or the vineyards, he felt the shock of approaching danger and promptly sought help in prayers or

in long walks among flowers, bees and rapturously singing birds. Surely he overrated the threat of the opposite sex and feared the burden of promised gratification.

But as the final preparations for his departure were made, in the midst of all the excitement he suddenly became more daring; a joke, a glance, singing psalms in unison with a maiden's soul whose voice clung to his like ivy. Now, assured by impending freedom, Hetman permitted himself certain privileges.

Among the girls of the village he singled out Tamar. He did not know what pushed him, perhaps simply that she had turned her eyes in his direction. Long after, he blamed himself, realising that for him it had only been a game. But at the time, his heart overflowing with the imminent great quest for God, truth and final revelation, he irradiated such natural exuberance that women gravitated towards him without any effort on his part.

As time sped cruelly, Tamar became more and more attached to this sombre monk. Around Easter, they were sitting beside a mountain brook, watching and smelling the approaching spring. From the slope above came multiple, rhythmical knocks, as of flints striking, attempting to kindle a spark: those were small mountain turtles making love on the hills amidst the angry buzzing of disturbed bees. The crimson sun was sinking fast and a flock of swallows swept purposefully across the valley. She wrapped herself in her shawl.

'How beautiful life is!' she exclaimed. He did not respond.

'And how little we need to be happy.' Gently she pressed his hand, but he moved away. 'Hell,' she cried out, 'it's too beautiful to be true. So the question is whether there is more happiness or pain in our life. Only in dreams it all appears understandable, in reality it is mostly filth and blood. Isn't that so?' She bent closer. 'What is the matter with you?' she asked, alarmed; he looked so hostile and distant.

'It's time I told you, Tamar. I'm about to become a travelling monk and will soon be leaving, perhaps for ever, in search of a complementary revelation.'

She grew very pale. 'Well, she said, avoiding his eyes, 'the revelation and I are unequal entities. No fight is possible for me. But as God is my witness, I would be a good mate for you, and the Abbot would surely grant us absolution. My aunt married a monk and never regretted it.'

She looked so lovely and pure and reliable.

'You must understand,' he blurted out. 'You mentioned the beauty and the dirt and blood in our life. It all stems from the Prince of Evil who governs this world. If we could make him repent, and re-establish him as Lucifer, the Star of the Morning, evil would disappear, cut off at the root. Our mistake is that we fight the manifestations of evil instead of going to its original source.'

'But how can you achieve that?' she asked, naive enough to expect an answer.

'Through love of Satanael's past. Through love and pity and courage we shall bring him back to the true God who is Love. This is the new covenant! But to make it convincing I need enlightenment and help.'

'Of course, of course,' she mumbled. 'I'm afraid it's time for me to go.' She rose, vulnerable and tenacious, a virgin and a combatant, her adolescent arms (that would be so knowledgeable when embracing and carrying a child) hanging helplessly down.

He was almost ready to invite her as his companion on this journey, but luckily he refrained. She walked away, straight and stiff, with the steadiness of a somnambulist who, if wakened, would promptly collapse.

And soon Hetman left, escorted to the nearest fork in the road by his numerous relatives, who were crying as if they knew that the separation was for ever.

Ahead of him lay a continent. He walked over mountains and steppes, traversed Don, Dnieper, Dniester and Danube, on his way towards the renowned village in the hills, where the Perfect headed a monastery akin to Hetman's but more sophisticated and historically glorified. Before making the final ascent, Hetman took a dip in the bay at the foot of the mountain, where he, who had been raised deep inland, swam in ecstasy among the intricate aquatic vegetation and multicoloured bony molluscs. Diving, he passed through sun-drenched windows into dark-blue night and along alleys of luminous fountains which lead to palaces of solidified growths. This experience in the rainbow waters profoundly impressed him and perhaps influenced his entire future.

His plan had been to abide for a while in the monastery, to pray and clarify his new revelation, but when, after the exultant passage through the aquatic Eden, he beheld Midgard in the chapel, all these intentions vanished. At her window, under the weight of the full moon, his young

blood found arguments so tempting and convincing that finally she had to ask him: 'Are you then Satan?'

'Yes, and if you are gentle and smile at me I will perhaps once again become the Carrier of Light, the Prince of the Morning Star.'

'I always wanted to save you,' she said, 'save the Prince of Evil, not Evil itself, for eternity.' And she opened the door.

'That's why I chose you from among all the virgins . . .' But when he tried to touch her, she drew away.

'How is it that a spiritual being, begotten not born, is attracted by carnal things?' she asked.

'To save God in man we have to destroy this material world, as we destroyed several others previously. That's why we must mix up everything that exists, good and evil alike, into one sphere that will eventually annihilate itself.' And coming ever closer, he continued in a hot whisper, finally laying his hands on her: 'We must inject the poison of confusion into the heart of our contemporaries, bring together fossils with space craft, cannibals with saints, prayers with fornication. We shall invent ugly theories and diffuse them in sacramental rites, graft irrational meaning on to reason, put the effect before the cause, combine stony inertia with spontaneous eruptions, relativity with the absolute, and promote death as the greatest life-giving power.' So spoke the intruder.

'But this road may lead us astray,' she exclaimed. 'Helping Satanael's scheme?'

'Not if you and I join forces.'

She knew he was lying, but she could not resist the noble temptation to purify Lucifer (or one of those who fell with him).

'Yes,' he confirmed her words, 'redeem the Prince of Evil and thus dispose of the source of evil. We would all become angels and saints again.'

And he kissed her, perhaps for the first time in his life kissing a girl without reservation. As for her, she had never felt anything comparable: a sharp dry spark spread through her, leaving a scar at the place where it issued; a mark under her right ear remained forever, usually pale but under the influence of strong emotions growing redder and deeper.

But the morning brought wrath with it. Both felt as if they were dying a shameful eternal death. However, they soared through a few more

nights of complete abandon, until they could not bear it any longer and abruptly separated: two criminals, horrified by their ignoble deed.

Hetman fled, leaving no trace. At the outbreak of the war he joined the Slav Liberation Army fighting the great gallant battle against Germany.

As for Midgard, she descended from the monastery into the village, joining an Open House, accessible to any male in the neighborhood – a custom deemed proper for girls in those parts. ‘I am nothing but a dead woman now. There is no hope left for me, because I truly enjoyed sin,’ she told the Perfect. And for the years that followed she led a wanton life of promiscuity and debauch.

Hetman, thanks to his courage and shrewdness, was in time promoted to the rank of officer. Life held only success for him, save for the constant torture of remorse. Though he had since known many women, the sin of having corrupted Midgard continued to weigh more and more heavily on him. He took to drink and finally, after the armistice, a bar brawl, as so often happens, ended in murder: he killed his captain.

Now there was no choice but to run again. And he ran south, to the village where once he had known hell through paradise (for the second God, who rules the material world, has his paradise too). So does the dog return to its vomit.

The siege of the community had been going on for some time. But Hetman knew the underground passages and could elude the red patrols which guarded the approaches to that eagle’s nest.

It was a rainy evening when he entered Midgard’s house through the wide-open doors. He was welcomed as any other customer and the girl with the dark, differently shining eyes led him to the room upstairs. Her bed was of age-old cedar, with a blue silken canopy and curtains all around, so that the occupants could concentrate without distractions on love making or meditation.

#### *Eight* THE DISMISSAL

Late that same night the two weepers hurried to the Priestess’ house. Midgard slept alone, diagonally across the enormous curtained bed,

and the women had to grope for her in the dark. They were all exhausted after the events of the last few days.

The Perfect had been taken critically ill: Abishag had sent for the weepers. Realising the seriousness of the situation, Midgard joined them without delay.

Candles had been lit everywhere in the Perfect's house; Abishag, dishevelled, wearing nothing but a night shift, was sitting on the floor next to the empty cradle; at the Perfect's deep sigh she sprang to her feet like a mountain goat and sped out of the room.

'You understand the need for sharing with us those things you do not wish to carry over into the dark fields,' the Priestess began, and the weepers took up after her: 'Oh, poor soul! Oh, poor soul! It is now or never. Get rid of it all. Get rid of the trash.'

The Perfect spoke. 'I am dying. I am an old man and I have been ready to go for a long time. But God ordered me to sustain you through this latest crisis.'

'Do you remember how I and Abishag, two orphans, came to this place?' The Priestess, assuming authority, interrupted. In unison, the weepers took up: 'Two innocent girls. God have mercy on us.'

'You'd better stop this nonsense and listen to me,' the Perfect commanded. 'The village is safe, for the time being. Midgard remains as Perfect and will preside over the Magistrate. If Elma returns, give her a place in the castle. Abishag should descend to her sister's old quarters and know men, before she joins the nunnery.' At this point, a howl from Abishag reverberated outside.

'What about you, Father?' the Priestess stubbornly pursued, 'What do you cast off here and now for your eternal comfort?'

'Oh Lord, help him shed all that is detrimental,' the two weepers sobbed, raising their large hands and waving them half menacingly and half imploringly.

'Yes, I do intend to clarify something to myself and to the celestial powers,' the Perfect began haltingly: it was obvious that he had difficulty breathing. 'It's not what you have in mind, though. It happened an eternity ago, but it still tortures me and perhaps should finally be dealt with.'

'O poor soul! Let him finally deal with it!' the weepers cried aloud, digging their sharp nails into their scalps till the blood began to trickle down. Seeing this, the Perfect exclaimed: 'Thank you, weepers, thank

you, but please contain yourselves for a while . . .’ and he proceeded, painfully catching his breath.

‘I see myself on an immense estate which must be somewhere on a south sea island. The air is filled with colours, scents and sweet sounds. A sort of paradise, as we in our ignorance like to imagine it. Indeed, life there was easy, everything grew by itself, without sweat, and the soul only wished to glorify God the Creator or join the birds in their song. For this, the soul had ample time, since nothing was urgent, nothing irretrievable. Occasionally, the owner of the property or his guards would come to the gate to collect dues from the fruits of the orchard, and always go away satisfied, leaving me and my pets from the woods and fields and rivers in thankful bliss. Such was the life I led and it seemed one endless happy hour.’

Here the weepers saw fit to come out with a series of groans: ‘Oh misery, one happy hour! Oh misery! Only one happy hour!’

But the Blessed continued unperturbed: ‘Then she appeared, the Woman. At first I did not recognize she was a woman, or the implications of it. My father had raised me in complete ignorance of such distinctions. But I did like her and she seemed to approve of me. So we wandered together through the fields and gardens and orchards. We played, sang, and unhurriedly attended to our pleasant chores. Resting when we felt like resting, sleeping when we felt like sleeping, and always content; even the beasts around us participated in this joy: we could judge it by the frolicking of the quadrupeds and the singing of the feathered creatures. I know, now, it could not have gone on like that forever, something had to spoil this universal concord. And something did. It started with the appearance of the Intruder.

‘Oh poor soul,’ lamented the weepers, ‘why did you let him in?’

‘Cutthroats and escaped prisoners roam in the woods,’ Midgard joined them, recalling the stories of Elma’s childhood. ‘You should have taken precautions.’

‘Oh pity. Robbers, cutthroats, escaped prisoners,’ groaned the weepers.

The Perfect went on, ignoring the noise he knew to be part of the ritual.

‘He was friendly, the Intruder, I must say, though he hardly spoke to me, directing all his attention towards the woman. Tall, reedy, with hands that swayed like threads, with straight, pencil-thin legs and ashy



curls resembling tiny horns, he usually stood in the shade of the thick vines growing nearby or leaned against the gigantic tree in the centre of our orchard. He talked incessantly but so softly that I could not overhear him, and I really did not care to: I played my flute and was still of good cheer. But she listened to him with ever more sympathy and attraction. What struck me first was the change in her looks. Her clay-coloured face acquired a disturbing pink hue; her eyes reflected the rays of two different stars; her skin began to glow as if lit up from underneath. And when he bent closer, whispering his lies, I could see the woman stretching out her breasts to him obediently. Soon he began feeding her the grapes off the vines, choosing the very full, almost overripe ones. After which, singing, racing and dancing, they made a habit of disappearing into the bushes.

'I confess I did not suffer, but curiosity and disquiet slowly overtook me. Then, all shining, she offered me choice golden-coloured grapes. First I tasted them with fear, but the more I ate the more assured I felt, my eyes were opened or so it seemed to me. Now I saw a heavenly woman, tall and majestic, with generous breasts, a pelvis able to feed and shelter me and a skin alluring as the sky at sunset. Most captivating of all was her face, smiling with the knowledge and sadness and compassion of a lioness approaching a sacrificial lamb. Soon after, she delivered two children, a boy and a girl; this made her and the Intruder feel equal to God, the Creator of all living souls. Then she fed me more of the yellow grapes and I too knew her and liked it and knew her more. But she was not yet pacified and occasionally invited the stranger, and we all three knew each other. In time, our pets, both old and young, and the beasts and birds joined us in the orgies, so that the permanent singing and yelling and cursing and fornicating became an offence to heaven and earth.'

'Oh God, have mercy on him! Oh God!' wailed Agnes and Yagna.

'Of course, I did not yet understand that in order to equal God the stranger had to generate living creatures and that he could only do it by leading the Female into carnal fornication.'

'Poor, poor, ignorant soul,' the weepers lamented, this time truly saddened.

'So the landlord gave his orders to the guards. First the Intruder was placed on his back, and his thin, long arms and legs were severed and hung up high on the branches of the tree to serve as a lesson to any

trespasser. Bleeding and hissing he crawled out of the vineyard. And then we were evicted with our two infants. The woman had sense enough to salvage our meagre belongings so that we could set up house again. The cattle, the predators, the rosy birds followed us in bewilderment and disarray.'

'Oh blindness, oh ignorance,' they cried, 'thus you repeated Adam and Eve's miscarriage.'

'How could you!' Midgard exclaimed. 'You of all men. Poor Perfect!'

'Poor Perfect,' the dying priest echoed her and one could have sworn that he was smiling underneath his disconcerting beard. He paused for a while, coughing and spitting, though refusing the sip of water Midgard offered him, and then hastened on: 'Our life became what it was supposed to be: labour and fear. Joy sprang mostly from the grapes, which we learned to ferment, and from the passion of woman, the single womb of all sin from which pour down the various streams of crime. Every soul born to us came unclean and, thus, multiplied uncleanliness. The girls born to our children were all shameless, shamelessly they painted their nipples to entice and deceive the few males. Meanwhile the guards of our former landlord took to descending on weekends from their mansion. They were strong stout men, tall and attractive. They went after our daughters, fighting over them like predators. The children born from these unions were a special race, without memory of the common past and without scruples. By then, I knew the nature of my descendants, but they themselves did not know their nature.'

'Oh misery, oh darkness, oh shame,' the weepers howled, bending and twisting their huge torsos to right and left.

'Soon I climbed to the top of a wild mountain. On the fortieth day of my vigil there, a giant of a man, carrying a scarlet flag in his menacing arms, appeared on a neighbouring ledge. At first, he remained there, firm as a rock, but then he began to move away. I ran after him, shouting in desperation: 'Flagman, what of the road?' And I heard him thunder back: 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord!'

'When I came down from the mountain and started to dig a deep shelter beneath it, my kin made fun of me, the way they laughed at Noah. Though some of the youths, returning Saturday night from the bars, would condescendingly give me a hand.'

'Oh misery, oh shame,' splashed the weepers, 'Saturday night from the bars!'

But the Perfect brushed them off: 'And by the time the shelter was completed, a celestial body approached the earth and shook it. For several weeks there was darkness; hail, tornadoes and fiery boulders bombarded the plains. The sea rose and cliffs collapsed; beasts raged, spirits rebelled and most of our tribe perished. Their souls were burned by black fire, though their garments were left intact. For the day of the Lord is darkness, not light.'

'The day of the Lord is darkness,' the weepers repeated, wringing their hands.

'This is the lesson I'm about to reveal to you.' The Perfect forced his quavering voice to be heard. 'You are aware of *yezer hara*, the grain of Evil, which from the beginning was implanted by God in the heart of man and has been growing there ever since. The truth is that man was endowed from the outset by the Creator with an evil impulse. Man never was in complete ignorance of good and evil. Being of a dual nature, he always knew about the two possible roads. But how could God lead the soul in opposite directions, bequeath man with an alien impulse? There must be a good reason.' 'He remained silent, gathering strength for the final assault, thus giving the weepers an opportunity to produce their dramatic laments.

'Now listen,' he broke in, 'this is my ultimate testament. Since the material world was created by the Lord of Lies and Darkness, the true God, holy be His name, by the very act of throwing a spark, a grain of goodness and light and love into matter, created a dichotomy, a contradiction, a permanent, vicious, fratricidal circle. This spark of sanctity, which is a foreign particle in every atom of our body, acts as an evil seed and should for a time remain hidden, suppressed, camouflaged.'

'Why did He do it, why did He eject his saintly spark? To split the world and us? To make us all vulnerable?' That was Midgard's incensed voice.

'Out of love for Satanael!' answered the Perfect. 'Out of pity for his clumsy, imperfect creation! Christ himself warned us, 'I am not of this world!' But God did send Him here, because God pitied His first ungendered Serviteur, Lucifer, the Light of the Morning Star in

heaven and in us. And we must follow God in His hazardous effort to retrieve Satanael.'

'But that is what Hetman kept repeating over and over,' Midgard exclaimed, her eyes shining and mirroring.

'Glory to Hetman! Alleluya, alleluya!' the weepers rang out.

'Yes, he did speak about it, but in a different vein,' the Perfect acknowledged reluctantly. 'Never mind that now, since all rivers end up in one ocean. This is our last lesson to you. That saintly spark, under our skies, becomes in fact the *yezer hara*, the seed of evil, and should be considered as such. Brood over it, until this village will be razed and annihilated by giants and angelic-looking guards. But rejoice, the Flagman will return and wave you to a safe detour.'

He had finished, and to prove it made a feeble cross with both his contracted arms, as if blessing the village and the world. 'Blessed be the Lord and the seekers after knowledge, for it is knowledge that will bring us to God,' he whispered.

The Priestess cleared her voice and was promptly joined by the weepers in the song of departure.

'Hi, death, hi, is it you?

It is me, it is me.

And where have you come from?

From where I was, from where I was.

But you did not come for me?

For you, yes, for you.

Shall we go far away?

Far away, far away.'

They had barely concluded the ancient canticle, when the Perfect raised himself up and said: 'Now go and let me proceed. For did I not teach you that man dies alone, just as he enters the cold sea alone!'

## ÖSTEN SJÖSTRAND

Poems translated by Robin Fulton

## From Syllables On Night and Day

With uncertain fingers he gropes  
forward in the darkness.

The hands unfamiliar.  
But the face reminds him  
of someone he knew, once.  
The eyes,  
as if they were his own.  
Mouth and nose. Forehead.  
Something that doesn't fit.  
The hair perhaps, or the mouth.  
Like a distant relation.  
On the way towards himself.  
On the way to shoulder his fate.

Homeless he is.  
But in his body.  
With the body's senses attached to the earth.  
But homeless in his body  
and in his time.

1953

## from To The Immaculate Memory

How quietly she leans her head to the organ.  
She touches the keys as lightly as in a dream.  
The winds of age pass through childhood's grass,  
and the grass brightens, the forest where now is transformed.

The pipes sound like flutes, she lowers her gaze,  
lingering on by that day she has left,  
the shadows still follow her playing hands,  
darkness separates lily from lily, rose from rose.

But all turn and listen, to the notes' swallows,  
 the dogs forget their quarry, the rabbit his clover,  
 and the humans check their steps on the animals' ways.  
 And the unicorn is raised from its mythical flight,  
 in silence turns towards the past.  
 Sees in the playing air her heart:  
 quietly they breathe, the pipes' rejoicing flutes.  
 The light cascading from this strange garden!

Darkness will separate lily from lily, rose from rose,  
 day from yesterday, human from human.  
 But the organ weaves a dream between wild beast and God.  
 This song from the homeless heart of innocence.

1955

### Swedish Woods In Summer

Late light in summer – and the road I follow, to blackthorn and lesser  
 celandine,  
 to chickweed wintergreen in the dusk of spruce – and the dog's hungry  
 scenting . . .  
 The snake, hidden in the clearing, was a branch –

is the picture of my transformed dread  
 when the time has come and the ground is clear  
 (it's not the 'I's abandoned snake-skin I seek)

The road lies quiet before me . . . Behind me: ant-paths,  
 flicker of butterflies, the dog round and round in his orbit . . .  
 The greenery, sunk in the woods, bore a scent –

bears the scent of a rediscovered track  
 the memory of an immaculate ground  
 (in there, in oblivion's woods, your face before you were born –)

Summer woods, calling back the well-spring under the dusk of spruce and the  
 meadow  
 that gives back the hiding-place, the scent of a water-course  
 beyond the soul's day – words that recreate the moment!

And the greenery grows dense in the gathering dusk . . .

But I return, tired as the dog at my side.  
 With blackthorn and lesser celandine, with chickweed wintergreen in my  
 knapsack.

I return to my room, and these lines

and write, turned to the trees (which are more than my words):  
 I return, to the gathering dusk.

1958

## To The Minimal

We live in a time  
 when words no longer suffice.  
 To breathe  
 is quite enough  
 I breathe in the diluted air.

And oxygen you give me  
 O voyageuse on abandoned paths  
 On ground that yields you steady my foot  
 you give me words within reach . . .

Among drive-shafts and mill-wheels  
 hidden among nettles  
 I found words that could be used  
 still good for a time.

1958

## In Praise' of Deciduous Trees

Let the grove keep its fleeting shadow  
 the open woodland its secret life  
 Let the brook not fall silent under moss

Thinned-out verdure is a thinned-out soul

And he who was homeless  
 or came from another land  
 heard among the foliage a word of home.

1958, 1984

## Fable

I followed a spark  
 and found a river –  
 Now strength is streaming through me  
 pressing me against the edge of my being,  
     forcing me to flee, to the mountains –  
     O waves, winds, resonances!  
 happenings hidden in other happenings,  
     questions which in the story-teller's mouth  
 become new questions at the close of each day  
     (questions which have demanded their answer  
     in more than a thousand and one nights):

Story-teller!  
 what do the clouds hide, hastily piling up  
     on the sky-line: the reinvigorating,  
 or the desolating ravaging rain?

What does the bell-ringing hide  
 reaching us down from the plain: another Sunday,  
     or the awaited burial  
     of the lightning's innumerable victims?  
 What does the insignificant, smallest bell hide  
 hidden in the mountains yet penetrating the haze  
     thrusting into our very bones  
     with its urgent message?  
 Tell us, what does it all mean? The whip's unexpected  
     crack (in the middle of training)  
 the trembling machine, the drum-roll in the centre of  
     the town-square, the running steps,  
 (in the cellar, in the attic)? And the rumbling up from the  
     yet untrod upland?

O, the rains are already beginning to fall,  
 and the rocket is rising, unconcerned, high into the sky.

And yet the story continues:  
 already halfway towards the high mountains, I  
     turn round, survey the river.

I still have in my hand my share of the mighty  
     earthly course. And I have  
     seen the outflow, the free horizon:  
     a face, a name –

Story-teller!  
 I follow you into the story.



## Displacements in the Earth's Crust

As before: a sunset  
 where the ploughman made his plans, remembered  
 yesterday's horse and harrow,  
 lit his pipe, pondered the ripe clover-field,  
 the seed, the new tractor –  
 And the smoke from his farm  
 and the farm beyond the lake headland  
 was the breath of a working-day: a rainbow  
 arched from the hand's firm grip and the eye's measure  
 over into dreams –

As before: a sunset  
 reflecting in the running stream aspen and alder,  
 the slender bridge  
 to the other bank  
 (where a boy forgot his fishing-rod  
 in the high grass . . .)

No smoke to be seen, no steps in the grass.  
 And no lowing from the cattle waggons  
 (shunted into a side-track  
 with nailed-up doors) –  
 Only a whimpering  
 in a blood-red heartless strip of light –  
 (Reaching here, on the other side of the sea?)

My God, my God,  
 what is happening in this night?

## Beneath Another Sun

The rumbling grows. But before the kitchen ventilator (one floor down)  
sucks in cooking smells and broken scraps of conversation,  
my master is (for that very moment) there: Ramapithecus!

By a rugged  
sluggish glacier, his vocal chord shapes, his lips,  
his tongue shapes his exhortation upon things that are signs . . .

Thoughts are carved in the water, in the cloud,  
in the rock, giving a foot-hold. The waking dead!  
The script of the Unknown perhaps? –

But it's not the ventilator. It's not  
an unknown being, the script of the unknown.

Across the water a jet roars.  
And graves are being filled in.

1977

## Annus Solaris

The first word stretches its roots  
in life's humus: see this plain,  
where the seed hungers to be born!

The second word, the third and the fourth  
grow, and the fruit is there,  
the good fruit and the bad.

Each word moves to action.  
The stones roll.

These words know no difference  
between green and green, they rest like birds  
as lightly on a plough as on a rock,  
camouflaged, hollowed into the earth's fissure!

These words are like birds,  
they discern what's pure  
in the eyes of two humans.

These words are like birds,  
they forebode what's malevolent  
in men's eyes.

Through millenia the stones of dust  
travel like photons marked with their origin,  
their beginning.

Where are the pictures of the origin,  
the unconsumed intention?

Tongues of fire, protuberances,  
hurl out indecipherable words,  
cremate our pain.

Stardust!  
Stardust!

Oh, give the past back to us,  
our coming into being!

1984

## In the Age of Exile

To Artur Lundkvist – these fragments of a long and almost hidden conversation.

This is the age of exile . . .

But the dark cave has rock-walls that trickle with moisture. The animal had stopped in mid-leap – on the rough rock-wall. Where was the living animal?

The living animal was me. But one of the two *dadophori* holds his torch upside-down. I thought, and looked into the scorpion's and the snake's eyes of glass and verdigris non-being. When my eyes looked for the confirmation of thought I saw that both torches were turned downwards.

I tried to throw myself aside, I tugged at my shackles, poured with sweat. An underground waterfall approached with the thundering of a herd of bolting wild horses. I wanted to scream but not a sound passed my lips. Was it now I should bleed to death, turn to stone?

But this is the century of exile, and you see yourself mirrored in the running water, don't recognise yourself, and although a farmstead in Sweden can be

glimpsed down in its green thicket and licks its wounds, although a grizzled horse neighs at sunset by the fence like a girl who has suddenly become an old woman, although the wind whistles a recognisable tune in the halter on the gatepost without a gate, you travel possessed by the mirage across plains, savannahs, steppes where the centaur was never conquered, and horses gleam red under the white mist of their skin.

Oh, there's a rustling in the branches among the cassia trees and mangroves. It must be the wagtail, or the willow-warbler, or the nightingale, soon to depart. To exchange winter's tropics for summer in the north . . . Yes, they'll come. They'll be heard above the meadows, on the garden path. Hidden among the leaves. In the courtyard of a silent, resting summer town. By the sea. But will I catch the almost forgotten intervals, the exulting trills? Will I find again the message of the guiding star, will I have the strength to kick against the pricks?

I saw them coming. Singly and in flocks above the roofs, high above the winter-green pines. The fieldfare, the yellow wagtail, the garden warbler. The cranes who, with their wing-beats out of the soul's past, sink towards Hornborga Lake. But the heart remained dumb and silent. Was the oak already ruined, had the roses fled?

Towards what cooling water will I, a fleeting guest, sink? And where is there a summer for me where fever is chilled? Before the wailing sounds can make themselves heard, the fire has already consumed the plains, the rising waters have already swallowed the safe hiding-places.

This is the time of exile and banishment, and the formula that annihilates the world can be written down in a minute. But also in a minute you can escape from the coral city's petrified sunset in the blood, you can make the minute serve you willingly, you can distinguish the denied roots buried deep in fat black earth, a tree shaken by buried machines with a starry sky glittering in its crown. A dreamer with open eyes, you see the new shapes in the dust and the morning with bees: landscapes swaying into each other, sailing corpses, drifting earth-masses, men uncreated as the land, embryos swaying in the water, still sleeping in their own flesh. Poet of exile, your departure half in love, half in hate . . .

I am still trying to remember which year it was that another world of time burst the fragile membrane and gave birth to the stranger within me, while I read, write, try to imprint on my memory other people's dates, their faces and voices: appearance and reality, the open and the 'strictly confidential' motive, the vision that takes by surprise and exhilarates in facts, poetry and dream: I still try to save the truth, the just and the beautiful, from time's flow of change and sudden transformation. While all the walls crumble towards a lost time, towards the carbon filament in the lowest sediment, towards the empty mirror on the bottom of the pail, where cities and stone have sunk in the time of red clay, or float like the water, the map and the pencil in empty and weightless space. Ash of space and cosmic thunder-clouds. A lost gaze from the

crow's-nest out over the sea of ether and earth's mirroring deck.

Under a foreign sun you have grown with the wind and against it, although a step-child in that land, a step-child with no fruit of the earth to dig out of the earth, you have still sought a home when the mist for a mere instant opened itself and closed a gate. But whose choice was it? Over forests without fire, over villages with closed eyelids, you fell like a meteor in the petrified dune, a spilt droplet of that distant unknown sun, fell and gave moments of vertiginous exhilaration to men with petty wingless desires, and you wanted to continue falling, in the deepest of wells, continue straight down in the earth's still burning heart!

With the black hat almost hiding my eyes, I suddenly remember my own past, under another sun: the valley where the unknown birds rejoiced even in the heat of noon, concealed among stone-pine, cork-oak and olives. Red-brown roads mounted the hillsides, slate and gneiss glittered, far down in the valley the river gleamed, where the foot-long fish hovered in the deep cooling shadow of an aspen. And I saw the forest clearing of a Swedish summer in the world, some rocks by a shore, a customary windy autumn evening by the sea. And poetry – the teacher of those who have grown up . . . I know the boundaries of my innermost self: in an occasional unforeseen moment I catch sight of a few glittering tracks before they become part of the normal circuit. With the growing certainty of the ticking minutes I understand that my innermost being will never become flesh. I am that which never functions in today's self-destroying Machine, the drugged world.

Although all languages are suddenly foreign to you, you still cross, now as before, servant of language, your own private threshold, leaving behind you mirror-love, the facile similarities between yourself and others. Instead – love of all that is not you but makes you possible: thus also the almost impossible, still possible love of an enemy who makes you real through opposing you, a love of the lie that gives the truth its salt, and of anti-love too, which shows the pattern on the back of the weave. Love, then . . .

In love of what is, was and shall be, I greet you, who have listened to your daimon, I greet you also in love of the despairing, the hopeless, the lost, among the darkest, longest shadows.

In this age of exile there remains the departure for new signs in the sky, an unknown, still recognisable earthly home, earth's mould, grains of corn, on this side of the universe's nebulae.

Conversations continue, all round the earth.

# Templum Drawings

DAVID MACLAGAN

*The world's aspect sub specie aeterni is its aspect as a bounded whole. The sensation of the world as a bounded whole is what is the mystical.*

(Wittgenstein: *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6-48)

The Templum drawings are a sequence of about fifty drawings based on a constant square format, made between 1976 and 1979. Their original germ was the concept of a performance whose central image was of a square 'precinct' with the performer continuously weaving his way across, into and out of the square, alternately appearing and disappearing; his words, and the 'narrative' of his path being punctuated at the margin.

*. . . where one is in a temple that sometimes makes us forget that we are in it. Where we are is in a sentence.*

(Jack Spicer: *A Textbook of Poetry*)

The square frame became the basis, the template, for a succession of drawings in water-soluble ink. Lines and forms could be drawn in and washed out, erased and re-affirmed. It was as though line and the definitions it asserted, had to struggle, had to come to terms with the more fluid and 'chaotic' element.

*Feeling's outline*

*We don't know: only what shapes it from without.*

(Rilke: *Fourth Duino Elegy*)

The drawings were a kind of anchor, a portable mundus. One drawing would, quite unintentionally, echo or reply to a drawing done several years earlier: it was as though they were images of some continuous process, in which 'I' was included, but which extended beyond 'me'.

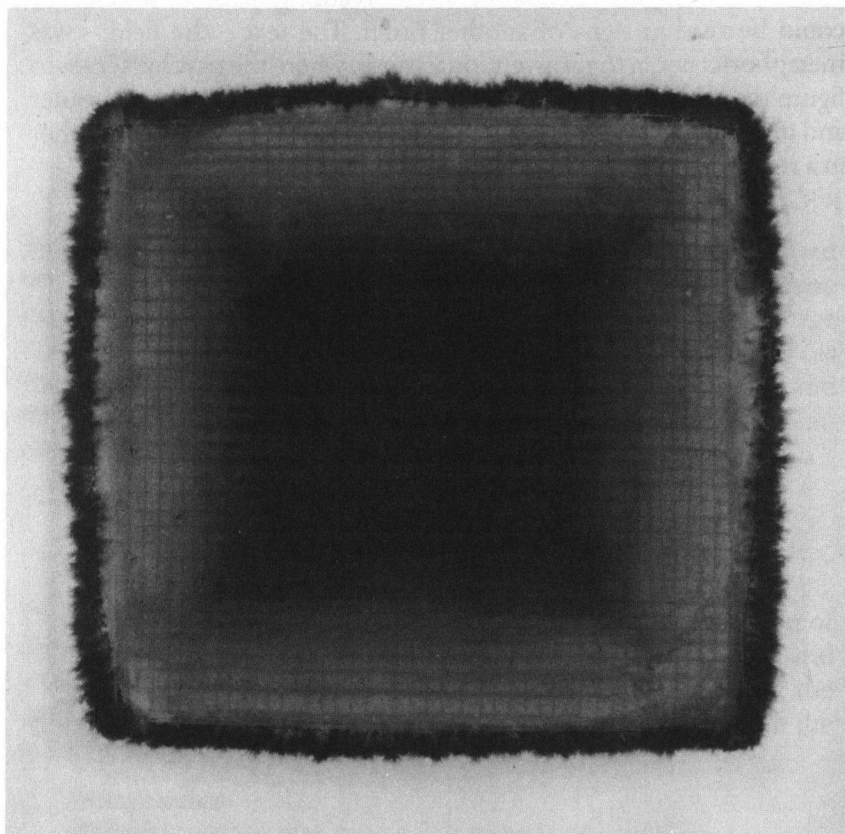
*Il traduit aussi le monde, celui qui voulait 'en échapper.' Qui pourrait en échapper? Le vas est clos.*

(Henri Michaux: *'Ailleurs'*)

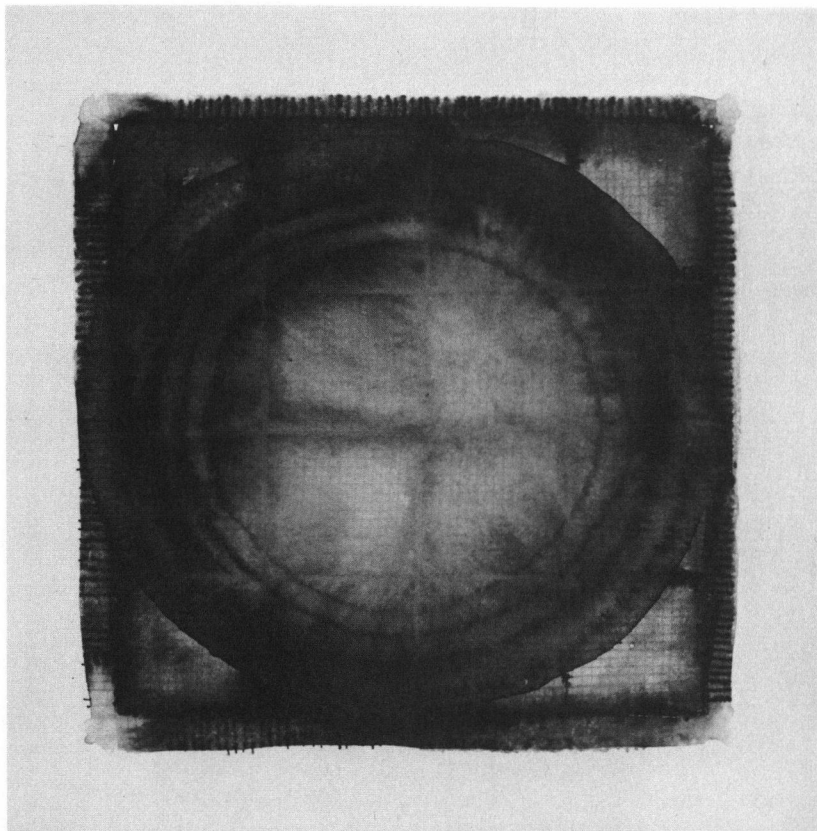
The drawing was something like an act of divination: the setting up of a 'frame' (or *temenos*) within which marks that might ordinarily be seen as aleatory or compulsive could be given breathing space, in which they could be read as signs of another order. The text – the field – was metaphoric: not in the conventional sense, where the psychic serves to figure the metaphysical, but in a more radical fashion, wherein outer and inner, physical and psychic reality communicate within each other in a real sense and on a more equal basis.

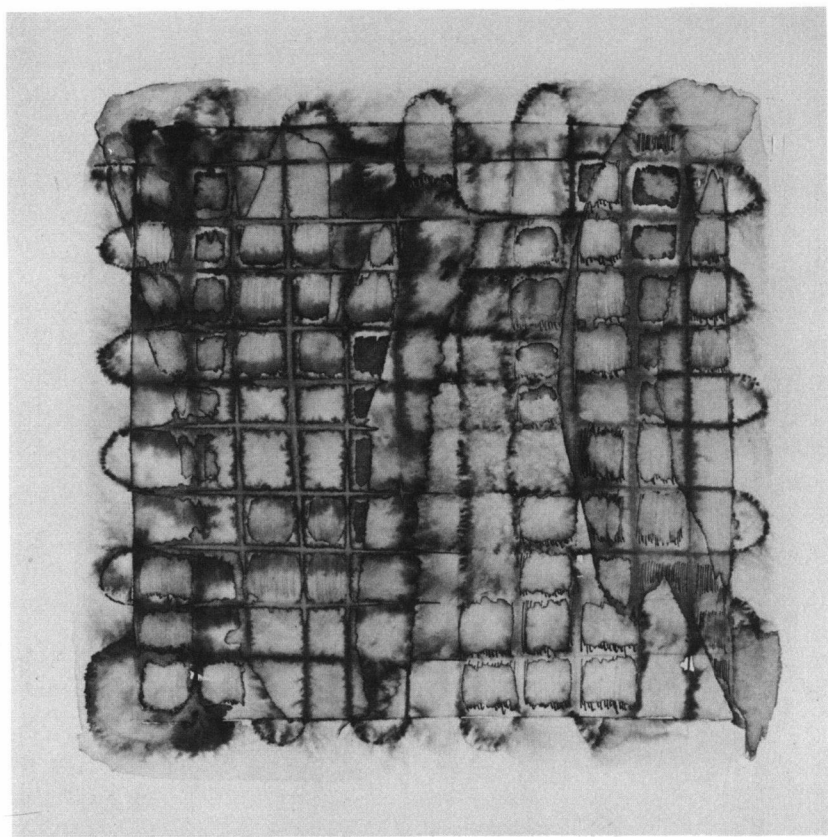
*The function of the mandala may be considered at least twofold, as is that of the labyrinth. On the one hand, penetration into a mandala drawn on the ground is equivalent to an initiation ritual; and, on the other hand, the Mandala 'protects' the neophyte against every harmful force from without, while at the same time helping him to concentrate, to find his own 'centre.'*

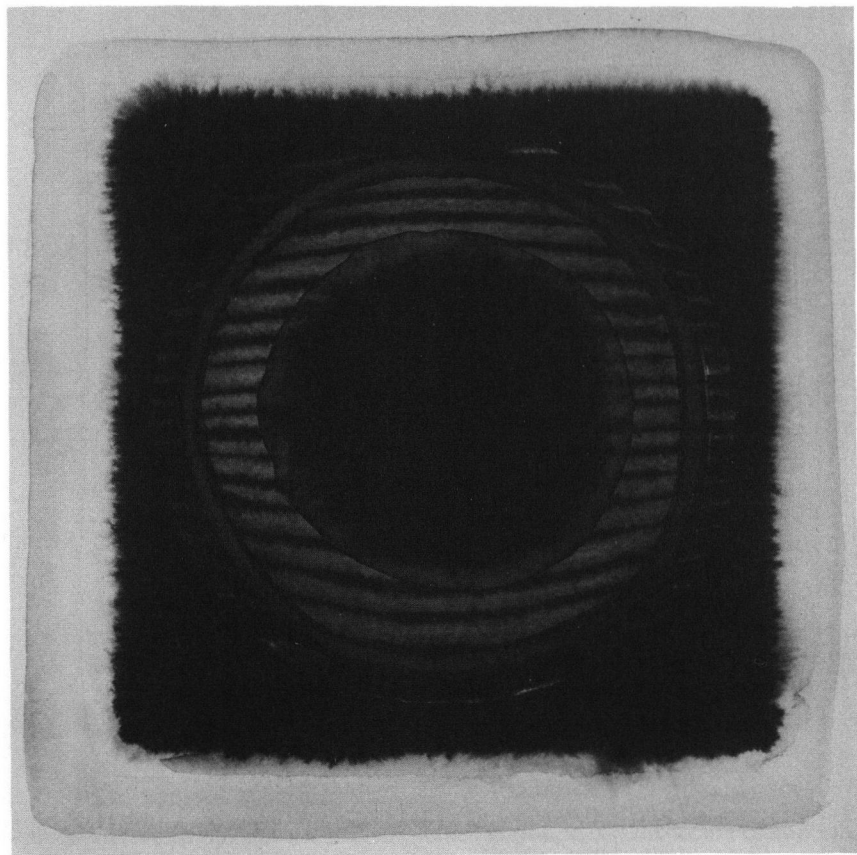
(Mircea Eliade: *Images and Symbols*)

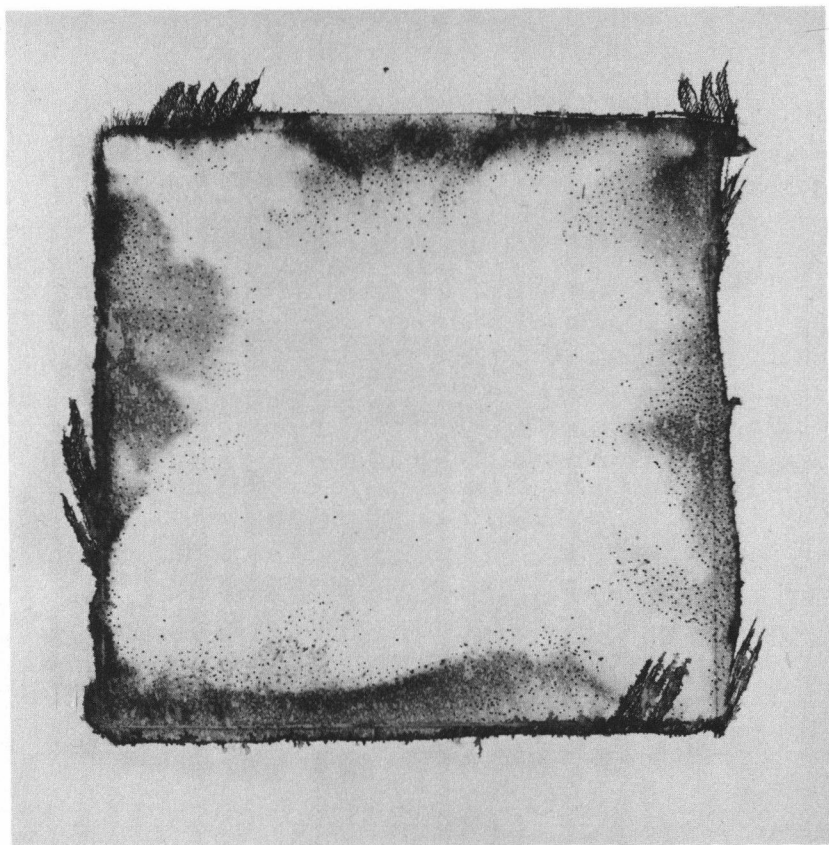


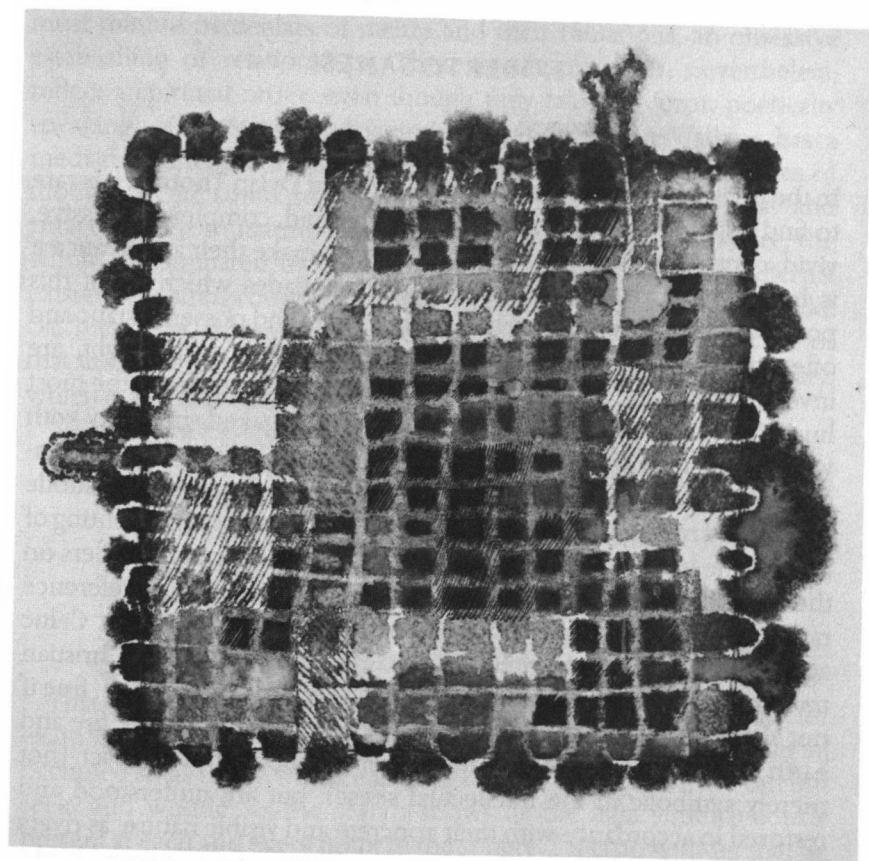












# Vernon Watkins

ROBERTO SANESI

## 1

In the poetry of Vernon Watkins, unlike that of Dylan Thomas, it is rare to find a spate of images which are in turn rapid, complex, aggressive, vivid, contrasting and riotous. When they do make their appearance it is by means of dialectical opposition. The shades which haunt this poetry are faint, though not blurred, in outline, and possess a static and often solemn tenderness; they belong, as it were, to the light, are invested with light, and relate to recognizable and at times to the most humble everyday things; yet they retain, in the naked simplicity with which they are indicated and presented, a sort of mysterious fascination, an element of surprise or even fear, which dissolves into subtle shivers and reflections, in a wingbeat, in the imperceptible sprouting of a seed. The imagery is one of an enchantment which rarely borders on the demonic (or the negative; and when it does so it is with reference rather to a more or less conscious corruption of the ancient Celtic agricultural and pagan rites, of neo-Platonism and the Christian tradition). The images are expressive of a mystical communion, free if not altogether at peace, in the primary elements of water, air, fire and earth – elements which are no longer symbolic and abstract (not merely symbolic in the intellectual sense), but are understood and restored in accordance with their concrete and visible nature, as rivers and waves, sky, fish, clouds, caves, volcanoes, grass, stones, birds, beacons, horses – a landscape peopled and shared, seen from his house on the edge of the Pennard cliff, ‘east-facing’, rhythmical, its cadences ample and serene. Watkins’s poetry is horizontal, as opposed to the steep and vertical poetry of Thomas.

## 2

A constant theme of this poetry is the presence of spiritual experience, of a unitary sense of space and time constructed out of dynamic images, transpositions and intercrossings which are based not so much

on metaphors of thought as on real perceptions, on experiences of reality.

The end is knowledge; the means is a constant investigation of the most minute particulars of nature and their mutations, an obsessive establishing of relationships. These metamorphoses, nevertheless, reflect a spiritual order, even though they take the form, poetically speaking, of patterns or descriptions. Landscape in Watkins has a mediating function: it varies like the fleeting moments themselves of thought, is in some sense both text and writer, protagonist and antagonist. From nature to the Logos, from the Logos to nature, the whole is dominated by the presence of the miraculous and eternal existence of things beyond the limits of birth and death. In a poem like *Old Triton Time*, among others, we immediately encounter the core of that ineffable metamorphosis of things immutable in their mutability, which is also at the heart of Watkins's work:

Old Triton Time responds to every mood:  
 He's the newborn who's older than the flood.  
 He babbles water from a dull stone tongue.  
 He's old and cold and yet the water's young.  
 To gain him is to lose him. I have seen  
 Loss bind him up with lichens: he grew green.  
 But if my fingers touch the water cold,  
 He suddenly seems young, the water old.

This is certainly Heraclitus, but it is also the Plotinus of the *Enneads*, for example VI, 4: 'We can no longer even name the spot [the light] occupied so as to say whence it came or how it is present; we can but seek, and wonder as the search shows us the light simultaneously present at each and every point in the sphere.'<sup>1</sup> It is no wonder that he was liked by the Eliot of the *Four Quartets*.

To gain him is to lose him: this is the absurdity, the concept of a mystical 'leap', and hence the necessity to grasp each object in the absolute precision of its outline (the creative result is the fluidity of the verse, the subtlety of pattern even when the poetry is at its hardest and most obscure, so closely reflected, in figurative form, by the expressive clarity of Samuel Palmer's visionary and metaphysical paintings) – to grasp it, at the same time, in its most hidden and withdrawn 'private' existence, in its continual changing at each moment before one's gaze to the point of bewilderment, and in its remaining at each moment

the seemingly labyrinthine obscurity of some of Watkins's early poems. As we have already noted, this obscurity differs somewhat from that of Dylan Thomas, although it possesses certain elements in common: it is an obscurity perhaps more conceptual than linguistic, experienced not through immersion in a mass of intricate experiments in imagery, but through the ambiguity of ideas in dialectical opposition, emphasizing, in the Plotinian sense, the ascent of the soul 'from the darkness of the senses to the light of truth'.

'It is the Method, or Discipline, that brings with it the power of pronouncing with final truth upon the nature and relation of things – what each is, how it differs from others, what common quality all have, to what Kind each belongs and in what rank each stands in its Kind, and whether its Being is Real-Being. . .' (*Enneads* I. 3.4.)

Where Thomas complicates, Watkins intensifies by simplifying, and, in his more drawn-out and fluid verse, the words compose the desired pattern in accordance with a mental 'tempo' (in the musical sense) – not, that is, vertically, in a sort of tower or conglomeration of words intended to be viewed from above, as a single point, but in a continuous line whose perspective seldom blurs or deviates.

### 3

Implicit in this musicality of Watkins's is the thought that is being invoked. Such music relates to a fundamental spiritual activity; it is the supreme category of *paideia*, a metaphor for art in general and poetry in particular. It is no different, in fact, from Plotinus' 'musician': 'all that offends against unison or harmony repels him; he longs for measure and shapely pattern . . . he must be drawn by the tone, rhythm and design in things of sense; he must learn to distinguish the material forms from the Authentic-Existent which is the source of all these correspondences and of the entire reasoned scheme in the work of art: he must be led to the Beauty that manifests itself through these forms; he must be shown that what ravished him was no other than the Harmony of the Intellectual world and the Beauty in that sphere, not some one shape of beauty but the All-Beauty, the Absolute Beauty; and the truths of philosophy must be implanted in him . . .' (*Enneads* I, 3). In



the same way, the rhythms in Watkins become images, take on body. The theme is developed in poems such as *Music of Colours – White Blossom* . . . , or *Music of Colours: the Blossom Scattered*, which contain the central idea of all his poetic activity, the workings of his philosophy, as well as his most typical poetic style (which is not to say that he does not adopt other styles in his work, from the sonnet to the ballad). These poems are an exploration of natural objects, of the variety and felicity of colours and forms and the manner in which they flow into each other, colour into form and form into colour, to become the union of opposites symbolized by the colour white: the concrete definition of the spectrum, the original light of which all things are mystically constituted. The scope of Watkins's thought here extends from neo-Platonism to Pythagoras, from the Hermeticists to the English Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century, above all Thomas Vaughan and Henry Vaughan. The concept of a light which unfolds by and of itself, which illumines itself, 'both thinker and [thing] thought, seen' (*Enneads* V, 3), occurs in a poem such as *They are all Gone into the World of Light*, or certain passages of *Lumen de Lumine*:<sup>2</sup> 'For darkness is the visage of cold – the complexion, body and matrix of cold – as light is the face, principle and fountain of heat. That which is above all degree of intelligence is a certain infinite, inaccessible fire or light.' We may also, however, cite a passage such as the following: 'For Nature is the voice of God, not a mere sound or command but a substantial, active breath, proceeding from the Creator and penetrating all things.'<sup>3</sup> 'This text serves to clarify the relationship of light-creation, light-God, expressed in endings such as 'I know you, black swan' (*Music of Colours – White Blossom*), with the darkness which itself becomes 'face, principle and source of heat'; – expressed also in the endings 'where light and darkness meet' (*Music of Colours: the Blossom Scattered*), or 'in light's reflected word' (*The Heron*), and the reversal spoken of in the lines immediately preceding the end of the first poem quoted:

I know nothing of Earth or colour until I know I lack  
Original white, by which the ravishing bird looks wan.  
The mound of dust is nearer, white of mute dust that dies  
In the soundfall's great light, the music in the eyes,  
Transfiguring whiteness into shadows gone. . . .

The 'substantial, active breath' is restored through approach and union: light and sound, darkness and silence.

## 4

Silence corrects language, strips it of what is superfluous, demonstrates the unifying function of thought (of the written word), and sustains the word by impelling it to express the point of highest intensity. One could even go as far as to say that silence dissociates music from all noise, all non-functional interference, and turns it into audible light.

There is, throughout, the excitement of intricate and particular experience, but I think its effect is hindered by over-subtlety. It is right to reject the superficial interpretation of experience, but what is then revealed must, I feel, be totally balanced with silence, the reluctance of the nightingale . . . what I feel about the poem is that it would gain by simplification. It is the hardest thing on earth to say what is simple, and unforgettable.

(Letter to Roberto Sanesi, 30th March, 1960)

The fragment quoted belongs to a letter of the 30th March 1960, which Watkins wrote me 'after a deep sleep beside our burning log fire'; and it is suggestive, among other of his remarks about poetry, of the creative processes of the Welsh poet (although many of Watkins's poems could be understood as remarks about poetry, apart from the fact that in other poems also, at times, observations of this kind are included *ex abrupto* as pauses or parentheses in a different context).

## 5

We may surely perceive in these creative processes a certain controlled driving force, which is not emphasis, but a drive to say 'all that can be thought' (Wittgenstein). The word is exalted through sensual participation and yet breaks free from the weight of the very elements which it visually transmits – the reticence of the nightingale, the precise meaning, so lucidly outlined in the language, of the rhythm, the ordering, of things. The bardic tone is not absent from this participation, which can lead one to a sort of visionary inebriation, a mystical spiral. For Watkins, the high function of poetry is total knowledge, transcendent purity – a philosophical function, so to speak. Needless to say, this philosophy is intuitive, not systematic. In its approach to the mysteries of existence and divinity, which involves the conscious use of pagan mythical material and of references to Celtic symbolism, to the roots of Welsh civilization and literature (his first book, *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*,

1941, is a revival of a Celtic ritual performed by bards in the first century of our era), it is not surprising to encounter the legendary bard Taliesin. Nevertheless, the critic Roland Mathias, who alone has undertaken a detailed study of Watkins, is right when he cautions us about how the bardic spirit in Watkins should be understood: 'There is, in fact, a marked distance between the poet as mystic, as reconciler, as revealer of the hidden order of the universe, and the bard as public celebrator, as guardian of the princely and tribal traditions, prophet of the people's destiny, even if both practised a jealous secrecy about the origin and practice of their writing.'<sup>4</sup> p. 97.

This spirit has nothing in common with the celebratory use of poetry in the rhetoric and repetition of the Anglo-Saxon *scop*. On the contrary, it is closer to magical-mystical meditation, nourished by a profoundly religious Christianity borrowed from the Old Testament and the Gospels (though it is not on this account orthodox: the very ideal itself of a clarity both classical and Renaissance, emphasized in works such as *A Book from Venice*, is evidence of a wide cultural background, comprising, as we have already said, neo-Platonism, Cabbalism, Hermeticism, etc.), and this Christianity culminates in an attitude which is as visionary as it is, above all, metaphysical.

## 6

We know that Watkins's father had read the future poet, in his childhood, English versions of the texts attributed to Aneirin, Llywarch Hen and Taliesin; but it was not for sentimental reason that this memory was later to flower so overwhelmingly in favour of the third and last of these. More detailed and practical reasons motivated the choice. One of the concerns that emerges most consistently in Watkins's work is the conquest of mortality: the ascent, beyond all multiplicity, to the total unity realized beyond the limits of time, the ultimate justification of the indissoluble presence of visible things 'united as they are in intelligible nature' – which we find in Taliesin, the conqueror of time. There was, furthermore, the place where Watkins lived: the cliffs of the Gower peninsula in South Wales, beyond the bay of Swansea, 'where shag and cormorant perch like shadows on the limestone rocks', offshoot of the Atlantic ocean filled with the flight and clamour of birds, with ferns and megaliths – the place appointed

for Watkins's lyrical descriptions, for his longing for communion in contemplation.

Taliesin the bard is thought to have lived in the sixth century, the son of San Henwg of Caerleon. We gather from the *Mabinogion* ('mabinogi' = instructions for your bards), a collection of four historical/legendary Welsh narratives composed between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, to which Lady Charlotte Guest added another seven stories in 1838–39, that Taliesin, kidnapped at sea by Irish boats while on his way to the court of king Urien Rheged at Aberllychwr, managed to escape and reached the coast of Gower by swimming.

The figure of Watkins is linked with the figure of Taliesin through an ideal identification, in the nature of a place which is a confirmation of his presence here and now – a place that has not been transcended, and yet whose status, through ancient heritage, is emblematic of a mystical/cognitive conception of poetry, untouched by temporal conditioning.

It is a landscape lovingly interiorized and described, but only for the sake of what it reveals to a vision which integrates the sense of mutable and immutable, transitory and immobile, with the single perpetual cycle of regeneration and ascent: 'I marvel at the beauty of landscape, but I never think of it as a theme for poetry until I read metaphysical symbols behind what I see. The true wildness of nature and the sea's indifference are the whetstone of the falcon's wing and of the thread of intuitive wisdom, capable of bestowing their grace in another dimension'.<sup>5</sup>

## 7

There are five poems by Watkins which are explicitly linked with the identification with Taliesin: *Taliesin in Gower* (in *The Death Bell*, 1954), *Taliesin and the Spring of Vision* (in *Cypress and Acacia*, 1959), *Taliesin's Voyage* and *Taliesin and the Mockers* (in *Affinities*, 1962), and *Taliesin at Pwlldu* (in *Fidelities*, 1968). Furthermore, as evidence of his increasing and obsessive recourse to the figure of the bard, we should remember that the first title of *Poet and Goldsmith* (*Cypress and Acacia*, 1959) was *Taliesin at Sunset*, that the subtitle of *Sea Chant* (in *Fidelities*, 1969) is *Taliesin to Venus*, and that the name Taliesin occurs often in other poems, as for example in *Swallows* (also in *Fidelities*), linked, significantly, with those of Aneurin

and Llywarch. These last-mentioned poems add nothing essential to our understanding of the theme in question (which in any case is not limited to what might be called the 'Taliesin cycle'), but they may profitably be borne in mind, among others, for a correct appreciation of the first and possibly most conclusive and exhaustive of the five poems, *Taliesin in Gower*.

The poem is made up of twelve stanzas of four lines each – long lines, a sort of epic-like fusion of two blank verses – with regular alternating rhymes, A,B,A,B, succeeded by A1, B1, A1, B1, etc. No versions are known with corrections or variations. From a structural and stylistic point of view, it does not differ substantially from other works by Watkins save in the exceptional length of the lines, a rhythm which becomes more frequent in some of the later poems but which is not repeated, except in *Taliesin and the Spring of Vision*, in the poems dedicated to the Celtic bard.

#### *Taliesin in Gower*

Late I return, O violent, colossal, reverberant, eavesdropping sea.  
My country is here. I am foal and violet. Hawthorn breaks from my hands.  
I watch the inquisitive cormorant pry from the praying rock of Pwlldu,  
Then skim to the gulls' white colony, to Oxwich's cockle-strewn sands.

I have seen the curlew's triangular print, I know every inch of his way.  
I have gone through the door of the foundered ship, I have slept in the winch  
of the cave  
With pine-log and unicorn-spiral shell secreting the colours of day;  
I have been taught the script of the stones, and I know the tongue of the  
wave.

I witness here in a vision the landscape to which I was born,  
Three smouldering bushes of willow, like trees of fire, and the course  
Of the river under the stones of death, carrying the ear of corn  
Withdrawn from the moon-dead chaos of rocks overlooking its secret force.

I see, a marvel in Winter's marshes, the iris break from its sheath  
And the dripping branch in the ache of sunrise frost and shadow redeem  
With wonder of patient, living leaf, while Winter, season of death,  
Rebukes the sun, and grinds out men's groans in the voice of its  
underground stream.

Yet now my task is to weigh the rocks on the level wings of a bird,  
 To relate these undulations of time to a kestrel's motionless poise.  
 I speak, and the soft-running hour-glass answers; the core of the rock is a  
 third:  
 Landscape survives, and these holy creatures proclaim their regenerate joys.

I know this mighty theatre, my footsole knows it for mine.  
 I am nearer the rising pewit's call than the shiver of her own wing.  
 I ascend in the loud waves' thunder, I am under the last of the nine.  
 In a hundred dramatic shapes I perish, in the last I live and sing.

All that I see with my sea-changed eyes is a vision too great for the brain.  
 The luminous country of auk and eagle rocks and shivers to earth.  
 In the hunter's quarry this landscape died; my vision restores it again.  
 These stones are prayers; every boulder is hung on a breath's miraculous  
 birth.

Gorse breaks on the steep cliff-side, clings earth, in patches blackened for  
 sheep,  
 For grazing fired; now the fair weather comes to the ravens' pinnacled knoll.  
 Larks break heaven from the thyme-breathing turf; far under, flying through  
 sleep,  
 Their black fins cutting the rainbow surf, the porpoises follow the shoal.

They are gone where the river runs out, there where the breakers divide  
 The lacework of Three Cliffs Bay in a music of two seas;  
 A heron flaps where the sandbank holds a dyke to the twofold tide,  
 A wave-encircled isthmus of sound which the white bird-parliament flees.

Rhinoceros, bear and reindeer haunt the crawling glaciers of age  
 Beheld in the eye of the rock, where a javelin'd arm held stiff,  
 Withdrawn from the vision of flying colours, reveals, like script on a page,  
 The unpassing moment's arrested glory, a life locked fast in the cliff.

Now let the great rock turn. I am safe with an ear of corn,  
 A repository of light once plucked, from all men hidden away.  
 I have passed through a million changes. In a butterfly coracle borne,  
 My faith surmounting the Titan, I greet the prodigious bay.

I celebrate you, marvellous forms. But first I must cut the wood,  
 Exactly measure the strings, to make manifest what shall be.  
 All Earth being weighed by an ear of corn, all heaven by a drop of blood.  
 How shall I loosen this music to the listening, eavesdropping sea?

The last time I saw Vernon, one Sunday in April, the sea was rough and purple as far as the most distant cliff of Oxwich. On the steep bank opposite the house, which was called 'The Garth' on the gate separating it from the thistles and the invading ferns, upon the first outcrop of white rocks which appeared higher in perspective than the flight of the gulls, a mare and a foal stood out browsing against the cloud-ruffled background. The wind, which never stops blowing, drove soft round drifts of sun-dried seaweed over a beach in the distance. I did not yet know that Taliesin had landed here. The waves pounded the broken coastline in dull rollers, dragging the shingle in and out of the incoming tide. Vernon, as usual, was excited, his sharp figure infused with a ceaseless nervous energy, which was revealed more in his gestures than his words, his hands tracing signs and symbols. His speech was sober and restrained, balanced even at its most intense, a considered series of connections which immediately related the concrete aspect of the thing in question to its secret implication – an implication which might appear eccentric, but which delineated and conveyed, better than any description, his enchanted, lyrical communion in a kind of limpid logic. Inseparable from this, as in his poetry, was the unresolved, unresolvable contrast between a Pan-like inspiration and an authentic aspiration to a cultural ideal which was in some sense aristocratic. That day it was apparently important, indispensable, to rush down to the sea in a cleft of the rocks, in order to see and touch a mysterious inscription on a stone, possibly a barely uncovered Roman tombstone. I recall that for a moment I associated this always inevitable appeal of Watkins to an unclearly defined past with Nietzsche's concept of 'inactuality'; an appeal which was not a negation of the past but an overcoming of it – perhaps, indeed, with the aim of 'rendering it imperceptible and as it were painting it over'<sup>6</sup> – and it suddenly seemed to me a mistake. Even now, making the proper distinctions and taking into consideration the totality of his work, I would not reject such an association, if for no other reason than that of the cultural climate to which he could be said to belong. This is not, of course, a decadent climate of sumptuous excess; but nor is it alien to those aspirations towards the absolute of which art, and especially poetry because of its capacity to express things in terms of Dionysian musicality, is considered to be the highest



moment, the ultimate condition of perfect harmony, triumph over time, over the perpetual flux of things. The privileged position assigned by Watkins to art as a prophetic activity, verging on the mystical, and its relation to the theories and creative exercises of decadent writers such as Pater and Nietzsche, is a point which should not, perhaps, be underestimated. Vernon ran like a boy towards the sea, his white hair ruffled, his eyes clear and calm.

## 9

The poetry is motivated and sustained – articulated – by an acoustic enchantment, a dazzling musical flow which is in perfect consonance with the marvelling acceptance of the objects of vision, and a repetition of names (more a naming than a description, and of the ‘moments’ rather than the aspects, however remarkable, of a landscape) which neither abstracts nor blurs, however, the contours of the particular within the joyous Dionysian eddy. There is no abandonment, no loss; the free surrender to mystical/aesthetic possession is not frozen in the mechanical processes of the mind and the reason, yet neither is the instinct corrupted; it is if anything corrected, balanced, by the tendency to theorize. ‘All art constantly aspires to the condition of music’, said Walter Pater, and the same is true of Watkins. The rhythmical musicality of *Taliesin in Gower* is not just a rhetorical device, a superficial reference to a ‘poetic’ or, worse still, to an external ‘bardic spirit’ which exhausts creative energy in mere mouthing. It would be truer to say that in this case it constitutes a means, a connection between the two aspects, prophetic and conceptual: it is both means and end, like the light in which all things are engulfed. There is no difference: silence contributes to music (‘the reluctance of the nightingale’) as a moment of meditation, a point of reference for the continuous diachronic/synchronic play on which the paradox of doubt and knowledge, movement and stillness, is based, of the poet who identifies himself with Taliesin. In the name of all in which he professes to believe it would be absurd and contrary to his atemporal conception of his own poetic activity to break off a communication. Music is, moreover, exorcism. In aspiring to an ‘unformed’ condition of coincidence and contemporaneity *beyond* the limits of the transitory world of sense, neither the senses nor their capacity for perception are denied. On the contrary, they forcibly underline every allusion to the presence of



reincarnations which claim to be real, just as in emphasizing the reconciliation of the particular with the universal, the mutable with the immutable, the intuitive with the rational, these 'moments' retain their own individual outlines. But there is no question of passively tracing the elements of a topographically recognizable landscape, nor of vaguely suggesting a place through allusions to a Welsh atmosphere as suggestive as they are casual. The *principio individuationis* functions in a meticulous fashion: each element possesses a precise reason, or acts through strict analogy.

In the Taliesin cycle Gower is Gower, even though 'There are two natures' (Poet and Goldsmith). Oxwich is the great beach which stretches to the west of the gulf of Swansea, beyond Mumbles Head and Watkins' house; the Three Cliffs border it on the east side, and Pwlldu – 'an eternal place!' (*Ballad of the Equinox*) – is a nearby spring.

In reading one suddenly becomes aware, in the fluid succession of clearly delineated images, in the relationships created, of the guiding principles of a thought which is coherent and alert to all possible developments; and the deliberate underlying tensions, symbolic and aesthetic, with which the text abounds, are perceived as more relevant than the inspired inarticulate tone would lead one to expect. The very fact that the sea is 'eavesdropping' is a reversal: the powerful, sonorous rhythm of the sea which pervades the entire poem does not merely enter into other, earthly rhythms and meanings, but is a part of them, contains and reflects them. It is neither a background nor an accompaniment, but the principal index to the total unity expressed in the composition as a whole. And, coming immediately after the declaration of belonging to that country, is the play of metamorphoses, conjunctions and oppositions, the magical-mystical epiphanies belonging to ancient Celtic tradition and neo-Platonism, but not devoid of those Christian elements which qualify Taliesin's new incarnation, and which are foreshadowed in the former.

The identification of Watkins with Taliesin is something which can be traced directly to its source. The theme of transformation into something other than oneself, of metamorphosis in the natural forces which are to be controlled, is very common in Celtic thought, as indeed in all magic, and is found in countless texts. One of the most ancient of these is apparently an obscure poem, which exists in an English translation by R. A. S. Macalister:<sup>7</sup>

I am wind on sea  
 I am Ocean-wave,  
 I am Roar of Sea,  
 I am Bull of Seven Fights,  
 I am Vulture on Cliff,  
 I am Dewdrop,  
 I am Fairest of Flowers,  
 I am Boar for Boldness,  
 I am Salmon in Pool,  
 I am Lake on Plain . . .

The poem is attributed to Amairgen, who is supposed to have recited it when he arrived on Irish soil. Alwyn and Brinley Rees<sup>8</sup> write that: 'Amairgen on the ocean of non-existence embodies the primeval unity of all things. As such he has the power to bring a new world into being, and his poems are in the nature of creation incantations.'

The plurality of the forms assumed, which is practically a formula in Celtic literature, a type of chant of initiation, is evidence not only of a desire for Panicle participation, but of a wish to be created through the process of perpetual natural renewal, by taking upon oneself every visible aspect, every force and quality. It is as though the self, simultaneously subject and object, is transformed, through its 'descent' into the things named, into these very things, and at the same time achieves an indissoluble spiritual unity to the point at which it becomes vision. In the poems by Taliesin<sup>9</sup> we have the same declarations, the same cyclical conception of existence:

Another time I was enchanted:-  
 I was a kingfisher; I was a young salmon;  
 I was a hound; I was a hind;  
 I was a buck on the mountain;  
 I was a butt, and I was a spade;  
 I was a hatchet in the hand;  
 I was a pin of the tongs  
     for a year and a half.  
 I was a light-speckled cock  
     over cackling hens.  
 I was the stallion of a stud:  
 I was the bull of a homestead:

I was the miller's bolter –  
                   the ground corn of the farmer.  
 I was a grain in the furrow's womb;  
 I grew up on the hill . . .

(*The Festival*)

I was in many a guise  
                   before I was disenchanted.  
 I am a grey-cowled minstrel:  
                   I believe in illusion.  
 I was for a time in the sky:  
                   I was observing the stars.  
 I was a message in writing:  
                   I was a book to my priest.  
 I was the light of the altar-horns,  
                   for a year and a half.  
 I was a bridge, which is stationed  
                   over three score water-meets.  
 I went travelling: I was an eagle;  
 I was a coracle on the seas.  
 I was the attraction in good.  
 I was a drop in a shower.  
 I was a sword in the hand-grip:  
 I was a shield in battle.  
 I was a string in the harp of enchantment for nine years  
 In water I was the spume,  
 I was a sponge in the fire . . .

(*The Battle of the Scrub*)

None of the transformations in the catalogue seems to be accidental. Apart from the obvious network of Christian allusions on a pagan structure (even the Hermetic and Cabbalistic dependence on numbers, for example the recurrence of the number three, or of its multiples and submultiples, can be traced back to Christian symbolism), we should note the constant relationship between the parts and the whole of each object into which Taliesin is transformed, and the emphasis on the masculine aspect, the phallic allusions, which are particularly obvious in *The Festival*. The references to Christianity are confirmed in another text, *Hanes Taliesin*, translated into English by Lady Charlotte Guest:<sup>10</sup>

I am a wonder whose origin is not known.  
 I have been in Asia with Noah in the ark,  
 I have seen the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra;  
 I have been in India when Roma was built,  
 I am now come here to the remnant of Troia.  
 I have been with my Lord in the manger of the ass;  
 I strengthened Moses through the water of Jordan;  
 I have been in the firmament with Mary Magdalene . . .

This is a passage in which, apart from the participation in events which are widely separated from each other, prominence is given to that abolition of historical time which is a fundamental element of Watkins' poetry. I said earlier that the identification of the Welsh poet with Taliesin can be traced directly to its source: the first line of *Taliesin's Voyage*, which may be related to the first line of *Taliesin in Gower* and to another passage in the same poem ('In a butterfly coracle borne/I greet the prodigious bay'), refers to the arrival of the bard at the Welsh coast in accordance with the information given in the *Mabinogion* ('The fishing-boat brought me'); *Taliesin and the Mockers*, whose incantatory rhythm is structured on that of *The Festival* and other original texts, takes up the allusions found in *Hanes Taliesin* ('I saw the building/Of the Tower of Babel./I was a lamp/In the temple of Solomon').

There are many common elements: the sea, of course, and wheat in the form of ear and of grain; the flow of water; horse and eagle; with the addition, typical in Watkins, of the constant clamouring of all types of birds: cormorant, seagull, curlew, falcon, lapwing, crow, lark and heron. These occur not as lyrical or decorative devices, but as reinforcements of the musical conception involved and in order to emphasize the more subtle opposition between black and white. There are other elements, too, which underline the play of contrasts between the animal, vegetable and mineral worlds, of the relationships of water, earth, air and fire ('Three smouldering bushes of willow, like trees of fire'); the masculine/feminine relationship as exemplified in the sun and moon, down to the use of elements which are more unexpected ('the unicorn-spiral shell'), but nonetheless charged with meaning. And, while remaining balanced between more or less obscure references of pagan, and above all Celtic, origin, the poetry moves perceptibly from its beginnings in the direction of a Christian, if heterodox, mysticism.

'I am foal and violet', proclaims Watkins's bard. The image of the horse, which occurs so often, would not perhaps need to be interpreted in any arcane sense, and could simply be seen as an allusion to the landscape, had not Watkins, following a Welsh folk tradition, used it so extensively and consciously and in so many ways. This is so particularly in his first published work, *The Ballad of the Mari Lwyd* (1941). In many parts of Wales, it is the custom on the last night of the year for a horse's skull decorated with ribbons to be carried from house to house by young men who, invoking their sacred burden and inviting participation in a poetry contest – sung poetry, in the manner of the annual *Eisteddfod* – beg for donations of food and drink. Here, the horse is associated with the cult of the dead, and, insofar as the ritual is repeated at the end of the year, on the death of the seasons, involves a concept of time (as in the persistent reference to the hour-glass); it is also a symbol of power and divinity, and is related to a solar cult. The two interpretations are not in contradiction. Both envisage powers which are alien to the world of the living, forces occult and subterranean, the mechanisms of fertility and sterility, light and darkness, the cycle of the seasons. In Celtic archaeology the image of the horse is practically a commonplace: we need only recall the great horses carved into the sides of the chalk hills of Wiltshire, or of the White Horse of Uffington in Oxfordshire, which seems to date back to about 200 BC, or of the many coins on which the image of the horse is combined with the king's name and head. Watkins' *Mari* (mare) is a sacred object, a principle of perennial renewal which conveys the sense of a diffuse spirituality, of another world alongside the visible world, and it transcends even the dichotomy between masculine and feminine. Furthermore, we read in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*<sup>11</sup> how, through a series of corruptions and repressions in Celtic literature of the myth of Demeter, as the stallion signifies the virile power identified with the sun, and the mare corresponds to the fertility represented by the moon (the Great Mother etc.), the mare is also the goddess of poetry, the inspiring and protecting Muse. In Watkins's writing these different connotations are strongly welded together, or at any rate are an echo of the original text: 'Because the bard is the oracle of that spirit, of that world, his task was traditionally thought of as sacred . . . It is doubtless

this different, if traditional, conception of the poet's role which sets Vernon Watkins apart from the profane modern world. He is a true initiate . . .'<sup>12</sup> In the oracular attitude adopted by Watkins, this merging with the landscape and its attendant *imagery* is part of a system of symbolic conventions; and it is no accident that this system also nourished a by no means inconspicuous phase of the romantic and decadent figurative art which is part of a clearly-defined Northern tradition.

We are concerned here with deep and distant roots to which Watkins is a logical successor. Apart from the endless quotations which could be taken from a vast literary patrimony, there spring to mind the visionary landscapes of so many works of art: the work of Turner, with its sense of assimilation and impalpable melting into light, colour and atmosphere; the work perhaps of Constable, with its 'edges' which favour empty spaces and distance in a concentrated and expressive concreteness; of Samuel Palmer, of course, even apart from his most obvious mysticism and his most open attempts to be metaphysical; or of William Blake, whose prophetic constructions of new worlds, however, is 'excessive' when seen in relation to Watkins; or of Caspar David Friedrich's extraordinary submersion in a hallucinatory symmetry of light/dark, space/time, to which certain passages from R. W. Emerson, such as the following, could be applied: 'I am a transparent eye; I am nothing; I see everything; the currents of the universal Being flow through me; I am a part or a particle of God . . .'<sup>13</sup> This intense communion with the landscape, which when expressed in poetic terms transcends the particular or makes it synonymous with the unity of all things, as a lonely or solitary presence accentuates the emptiness surrounding it or as an absence increases the sense of fulness and infinity, corresponds to Taliesin's ideal embracing of the divinity of nature through the partial naming of some of the objects of nature; and it is the moment within which the poet, in his function as demiurge, attains and reflects its universal and symbolic language.

## 11

The 'unicorn-spiral shell secreting the colours of day' is an important image in the context of this adventure, undertaken in quest and in proclamation of the mystery of the occult and elementary natural

forces; and in its concrete objectivity it serves better than any other as a vehicle for the revelation of a divine macrocosm. Its structure combines the close compactness of linear, phallic form, which is suggested by the reference to the unicorn (a magical animal), and a curving gracefulness suggestive of femininity, which has reference to one of the most frequently recurring symbols of Celtic thought, the spiral. An ancient bestiary<sup>14</sup> speaks with ambiguous interpretative hints of the unicorn, among other things: 'A virgin is led to where he is hidden, and is left there to walk by herself into the thick of the wood. Suddenly, as soon as he sees her, the unicorn leaps into her lap, and embraces her, and is taken by her . . . Our Lord Jesus Christ is also spiritually a unicorn, and it is said of him, "And he was loved as the Son of the Unicorns" . . .' As for the spiral, the persistent motif of continuity (as well as of the serpent, the uroborus, sexuality, primary oracular energy, labyrinthine mystery of the spirit, etc.), it is to be found in the most disparate and distant times and places as a metaphor of the long and tortuous journey of the soul through death to rebirth. It is found equally, and with the same meaning, on the walls of the tombs of the sun-worshippers and on the Celtic stone crosses of the first Christian period.

## 12

Within this nature, expounded in accordance with a structure abstract as to its latent concepts, but definite as to contours, each object is a microcosm which refers us to a greater pattern, a pattern whose totality is visible in these partial features. 'I have been taught the script of the stones, and I know the tongue of the wave': a relationship is established between stillness and fluidity, stasis and motion. Again, 'These stones are prayers': this is a fundamental point. In other writings, the poet is entrusted with the task of analysis, revelation and celebration, through signs and symbols which represent the primordial coming-to-be of the sacredness of writing in the act of naming, and in the repetition and arrangement of natural forms. In the kingdom of the eternal present, in the absolute atemporality in which the 'inspired' poet moves, in his celebration of miraculous forms, the partialness of his vision ('And adapt my partial vision to the limitations of time', *Taliesin and the Spring of Vision*) springs from the inevitable adaptation to the forms themselves of nature. Writing is an unsatisfactory medium, precisely because it is



partial, but it is the only one which can define and transmit the seeming absurdity of the harmony between measurable and infinite time, as the augurer bases the art of divining itself on the cries of birds and the tracks left by passing animals. Everything leaves traces in time: 'I speak, and the soft-running hour-glass answers' (*Taliesin in Gower*); '... sand of the hour-glass,/And the sand receives my footprint' (*Taliesin and the Spring of Vision*). The signs and traces are resonant; divination is inseparable from this natural 'writing'. (The lines 'I have slept in the winch of the cave/With pine-log', obscure as they sound, could be seen as relating to the divinatory art of the bard if one thinks of the various affirmations that Taliesin himself makes in his poems, such as 'I am familiar with every branch/In the cave of the Arch-diviner'. Moreover, through the connection of the word 'winch' with the Welsh term 'wince', meaning to wink, a relationship could be established with the idea of vision). The visible and the invisible are closely linked, just as are sound and sign, letter and meaning: the first three letters of the ancient Irish alphabet of the trees (Beth-Luis-Nion) correspond to the birch, the rowan and the ash tree. 'Sign and divinity have the same place and time of birth' (Jacques Derrida). This web of correspondences in Watkins's poetry, amidst a multitude of animal and vegetable presences which are precisely connected to the concept of birth (the violet, the hawthorn, the iris, the broom, the thyme and the wheat are all represented at the moment in which they burst forth from the soil – they sprout at every mention), is interwoven with a cautious but possibly not accidental numerical designation, and this throws greater light on some of the Christian references. The curlew's print is *triangular*. The landscape is dominated by 'three smouldering bushes of willow, like trees of fire'. 'The core of the rock is a third.'

The place in which Taliesin finds himself submerged in the marine element is the last of nine waves. And just as the three bushes of willow – which recall, apart from the funeral connotations of the willow tree, the burning bush of the Bible – are linked with the 'course/Of the river under the stones of death', a river is associated with the Three Cliffs Bay. The emphasis is on the numbers three and nine, as is also the case in *Taliesin and the Spring of Vision* ('Then three drops fell on his fingers'), and in *Taliesin at Pwlldu* 'I looked; creation rose, upheld by Three'. They occur in other poems: the last poem in the last published collection, *Fidelities*, is entitled *Triads*.



The value of numbers, particularly of the number three, is well-known, and their use is widespread in the symbolical systems of both Paganism and Christianity, as in their various esoteric manifestations. Here we should merely draw attention to the fact that the number three and the consequent doctrine of the trinity are systematically encountered even in neo-Platonism, and they depend in some sense on the conviction that all is in all, that the whole is made manifest in the part, etc: 'Whichever of these things you take, it is the same in relation to the others, for they are all within each other and all of them are rooted in the One' (Proclus). In his *De Amore*, Marsilio Ficino wrote: 'The Pythagorean philosophers considered that the Trinity was the measure of all things; the reason for this being, I suppose, that God governs things through the number three, and that even these things themselves are determined through the number three'. It would appear that in the complex Celtic numerical symbolism, the number three is not the highest in importance. Nevertheless, the number nine, which is the sum of three triads, recurs in some passages as a special number. Here, for example, is what Alwyn and Brinley Rees<sup>15</sup> say on the subject:

The ninth wave is the greatest, but it comes from the outermost limits of the cosmos. What lies beyond the bounds of the cosmos is, in a sense, inferior to it, but it is also the source of all things.

(Celtic Heritage p. 204)

Compare Watkins's lines: 'I ascend in the waves' loud thunder, I am under the last of the nine': the coincidence cannot be accidental. In Watkins, who appears to abandon himself so freely to the ecstatic lyrical flow, the network of correspondences actually manifests a meticulous logical structure; the meanings are interchangeable, shifting from divine to profane and from pagan to Christian in a play of continuous and studied ambiguity. In his construction of a great metaphor of the cycle of nature, which is dominated by the sense of perennial rebirth, the simultaneous presence of the living and the dead, of the world of nature and the subterranean yet celestial world of the spirit, is also symbolized by the juxtaposition of Old and New Testaments, the burning bush with the three crosses of Calvary, and of Calvary, the hill of the skull and of death, with a rushing river which seems to refer us to the fountain of life, to Genesis and the Garden of Eden.

Taliesin in Gower, as a 'quest' for the reconciliation of opposites and for mystical communion, a spiritual journey whose goal is the triumph over time, avoids history in order to discover it in a deeper sense; it floats on a current of thought composed of a mass of allusions, which upholds it as it upheld W. B. Yeats, one of Watkins' acknowledged masters. In this sense, the poem belongs to a fairly consistent strand of the English tradition, the 'romantic' tradition *par excellence*, and is related, as Northrop Frye says in another connection, to a Protestant individualism, to a 'tendency to anchor vision . . . in direct experience'; it is 'a product of imaginative experimentation'. In its composition – which, it goes without saying, is also the formal principle for the poem's translation into musical fact and for its consequent development in time (rhythm) – there are extremely close correspondences between the concept of time in the Taliesin cycle, a concept which is born of total immersion in light and music (a fact which is more evident still from a reading of all Watkins' work), and the concept of time in Plotinus. These correspondences merit a detailed analysis, woven as they are into the text in ways which are sometimes unexpected, through hints so subtle as to appear unconscious. The theme of the spiral, of the eternal return, of contemporaneity, of the coincidence of the whole with the part is almost an obsession. The word 'time' is one of the most frequent in Watkins' work. A few quotations will illustrate 'this in the case of the Taliesin cycle: 'Yet now my task is to weigh the rocks on the level wings of a bird,/To relate these undulations of time to a kestrel's motionless poise', and again, ' . . . the crawling glaciers of age/Beheld in the eye of the rock, where a javelin'd arm held stiff/. . . reveals, like script on a page,/The unpassing moment's arrested glory' (*Taliesin in Gower*); 'Here time's glass breaks, and the world is transfigured in music'; 'Time reigns . . .', ' . . . adapt my partial vision to the limitation of time' (*Taliesin and the Spring of Vision*);

Time I pursued  
And saw the kill.  
Life was renewed  
Where time lay still.

(*Taliesin's Voyage*)

He built for him  
His eternal garden,  
Timeless, moving,  
And yet in time.

(*Taliesin and the Mockers*)

Iconographically speaking, we should observe that in general the concept of time is expressed entirely in mental terms, but according to natural and primitive representations; the later conventional images, Renaissance and Baroque, of the scythe, old age, crutches etc. – of the decadence and destruction, in fact, attributable to Saturn/Kronos – do not appear, whereas the images used allow of an interpretation of time closer to that of the Classical period: time as 'Kairos', the burning moment of decision which signals a turning-point, a point of change (as at the end of *Old Triton Time*) in the evolution of life and the universe; – time, above all, as 'Aion', in accordance with the concept, Iranian in origin, of the divine principle of eternal creativity. Taliesin's progress 'through a million metamorphoses' is a kind of swift contact with the objective and the visible, a symbol of the necessity to identify with the partial in order to attain to union with the totality, a parabola of descent and ascent, a revelation of the functioning of that world of the spirit which the Celtic genius imagined:<sup>16</sup> 'it introduces a feeling of transparency and interpenetration of one element with another, of transposition and metamorphosis.' (David Jones) – a world not unlike that of Plotinus, manifested in elemental confrontations and miming a progressive return to the origin, going back through time from the present to union with the absolute beginning.

This beginning is the One, the sum of fragments, of moments, like time, which in turn are non-fractional sums and in which the total value of the One exists in its integrity. The second passage quoted ('where a javelin'd arm held stiff' etc.) seems almost to reproduce a famous Plotinian image, which was used in the same sense by Bergson, of a hand holding a rod: 'A hand may very well control an entire mass, a long plank, or anything of that sort . . . the power is felt to reach over the whole area . . . with no need of distributing itself over the increased area . . .' etc. (*Enneads* VI, 4). We see, too, how the appearance of 'the eye of the rock' refers back to the pre-eminence of the art of vision: 'Beauty addresses itself chiefly to sight' (*Enneads* I, 6). The other passages,

generally speaking, represent the attempt to define the paradox of temporality by referring indirectly to the essence of the One as a force 'generative of all [yet] none of all; neither thing nor quality nor quantity . . . not in motion, not at rest, not in place, not in time . . .' (*Enneads* VI, 9).

This poem, which contains categories that could be defined as pre-literary if not extra-literary – the categories of myth, ritual and so on – and which is informed by these categories, concludes with being, with a combination of these categories: it is a poem *on* and *of* them, an object which concerns them insofar as it is literature. To read it in this perspective, taking into account the multitude of archetypes of which it is a vehicle, which nourish it and which it revives and renews, is not to move out of literature, nor is it to replace poetry with meanings which are foreign to it and which transcend the subject. Object and subject come together. The verbal texture itself definitively establishes the fact that we are faced with a text which, although autonomous, does not escape its function as an archetype with precise and recognizable connotations; it does not include elements outside the subject – it is these elements. Even the theme of time, which relates to precise concepts in the wide repertory at our disposal by virtue of studies which have hitherto been thought of as disparate, is an aesthetic theme and concerns the making of poetry, the function itself of poetry.

This poem may be 'aristocratic' and perhaps 'unfashionable' in its stylistic and conceptual structure because of its apparent aversion to history, and its leaning towards a mystical outcome which is in some sense reminiscent of the Eliot of the *Four Quartets*, and which yet differs from him through being rooted in a national culture, in popular Welsh folklore. Yet in its emphasis on an anguished obsession with time and mortality, with the sense of life thus indirectly signified (the positive aspects of which should not, incidentally, be underestimated), this poem also affirms an open devotion to the creative will, to the capacity of the poet to transform the world; and in so doing it re-enters history and accepts its burden. *Taliesin in Gower* is also, therefore, a poem about poetry; its function is, above all, one of cognition.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This and following quotations from Plotinus are from Stephen Mackenna's translation.
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Vaughan (Eugenius Philalethes) *Lumen de Lumine*. Works, ed. A. E. Waite, Theosophical Society, 1919, p. 269.
- <sup>3</sup> *Anima Magica Abscondita*, op. cit. p. 84.
- <sup>4</sup> Roland Mathias, Vernon Watkins, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 1974. p. 97.
- <sup>5</sup> Op. cit. p. 70 (from the conversation 'Poetry and Experience' of October 1961.)
- <sup>6</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer als Erzieher*, 3.
- <sup>7</sup> *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, edited by R. A. S. Macalister, Dublin 1938 – 1956. Vol. XLIV.
- <sup>8</sup> A. and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, Thames and Hudson 1961, p. 99.
- <sup>9</sup> *Poems from the Book of Taliessin*, edited by J. Gwengvryn Evans, Tremvar, Llanbedrog, North Wales, 1915.
- <sup>10</sup> *The Mabinogion* etc., Lady Charlotte Guest, Quaritch 1877 p. 482.
- <sup>11</sup> *The White Goddess*. Vintage Books, New York, 1958 edition, pp. 425–427.
- <sup>12</sup> Kathleen Raine, *Defending Ancient Springs*, Oxford University Press, London 1967 and Golgonooza Press, 1985, p. 23.
- <sup>13</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, Boston 1836, pp. 12–13.
- <sup>14</sup> T. H. White, *The Bestiary*. G. P. Putnam & Sons, New York, 1954, p. 21.
- <sup>15</sup> *Celtic Heritage*, op. cit. p. 204.
- <sup>16</sup> David Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, Faber and Faber 1959, 'The Myth of Arthur', p. 238–9.

## VERNON WATKINS

## First Pledges

Now I am not so near to death  
As when, fresh-come from school,  
Thinking of friends, I caught my breath  
Above wept bones, Cocytus' pool.

First pledges: I with my own hand  
Laid frost upon their names.  
The shades' republic I had planned  
Was cast by artists' flames.

Six-petalled brightness stunned me still  
Beside the water there.  
The beautiful, magnetic hill  
Was charged with my despair.

The stark thorn and the virgin leaf  
Conspired with my regret.  
I guarded with my pent belief  
Affinities I might forget.

Above me, rooted in the fen,  
The sighing willow curled.  
Death was my good confederate then.  
We swore to overthrow the world.

I praised the true, the faultless line,  
'L'anima vaga': this I hailed.  
The fire behind the brush was mine.  
The pigment of the world had failed.

I touched the tree, the leaf, the stem;  
I touched the perishable star.  
Dear was the dark that fostered them,  
More dear than natural passions are.

O truly then, so deep my yearning,  
 I could not face the world revealed.  
 I looked, and, though the bush was burning,  
 Shadow and root restored the field.

Who has not died to find his breath?  
 Grief was grief then, nor did grief seem.  
 It was the mayfly of my death  
 That raised me from that stream.

Feb 1946 from 1937 draft

## Spring Song

Now the green leaves are singing,  
 Now the white snows are gone.  
 Sparkling, the water leaps  
 Over the stones, runs on:  
 Darkness holds my steps.

Straight to the upland furrow  
 The labourer keeps the plough.  
 The sharp knives turn the mould.  
 Where earth lies naked now  
 Clay can divine no sorrow  
 The winds have not made cold.

Across our silver morning  
 The swallows are returning;  
 The blue light of the sea  
 Already in the sky  
 Is knife-edged with their wings.

And have they crossed  
 The Capricorn of air?  
 Broken the seeming-lost  
 Autumn of despair,  
 Found no new light deceiving,  
 Yet found the first light wise?

I saw them leaving,  
 heard their chattering cries;  
 I fast and thirst,  
 Unsatisfied, believing  
 My Spring was first,

That filled my eyes,  
 Made my cheeks wet,  
 When first I broke disguise,  
 Walking with one who gave  
 Words from the grave,  
 A song no birds repeat.

## Autumn

Fall, late leaves; the time of birth is at hand.  
 The fountain sings; the trees are acting a play.  
 Birds assemble; they climb to a point, a plume.  
 They will be gone, be gone, but the land will stay.

The glass of time is a glass of hurrying sand.  
 These hurrying waters chatter upon their way.  
 All is a falling, a measure, a speech, a loom.  
 They will be gone, be gone, but the land will stay.

O sense of death, making these thoughts expand.  
 Momentous dark, crushed images of day  
 Each is a solar system in its gloom:  
 They will be gone, be gone, but the land will stay.

## Articulations. May 1955

A declared honesty is less valuable to an artist than an instinctive one.  
 That artist has no power who is not able to lay it down.  
 In art the real statements of power are those in which the whole intellect is  
 involved, first in a suspension of power, and then in the renewal of power  
 through grace.

To believe in a paradox is a half-truth; the whole truth is to live it as well.



If the poet William Blake is right  
 And energy is eternal delight,  
 Why do their works compel us so  
 Whose delight and energy brought them woe?

### Hölderlin's Grave

Stillness of moving worlds, O calm of beautiful bodies!  
 Light flashes. Water leaps from the rock, astounded.  
 Nameless, that exultation  
 Moves to a marvel of leaf, of pondered stone.

Never shall a mortal know them, the great transfigurers  
 Who reveal themselves here in a touch, by remaining hidden.  
 He called them gods, then in Hellas  
 He touched that heroic belief, like love in a child.

Love, that insists on faith, on the deepest suffering!  
 Blindly, burning with joy, with the movement of angels,  
 He came to Christ, O insistent  
 That He, the sufferer, sprang to heaven, the most joyful one.

### The Bond

You say my verses lack the sense of loss  
 For which no resurrection can atone  
 And that the soul must bear the bitter cross  
 Before it taste what is for heaven alone.

I answer that no bond by God made known  
 Shall see perdition. Love infallibly  
 Shall raise the identities from earth and stone,  
 Nor lose your substance, nor your tears for me.

[July 16th, 1952]

## Verses for my children

1

Remember this:  
 Hid in heaven  
 Is all true bliss.  
 All was given,  
 Now in moments,  
 Now in years,  
 Once, for your joy's  
 New-sprung tears.

2

God may translate  
 All to praise  
 Reason with fate  
 Equal weighs  
 Till power confessing  
 Holds the right blessing.

[April 1950]

## Moments

Yeats told me: 'Pluck  
 Strong life from stubborn strings.  
 After long labourings  
 You get the luck.'

Ezekiel beckoned  
 To the dry bones' despair  
 All the dread power of prayer  
 In one split second.

Hermes' rod  
 Made Hölderlin divine  
 Patmos, and see the Rhine  
 A demi-god.

Donne from the fount  
 Of wisdom gazed intent:  
 In the last accident  
 The toil may count.

Dante's eyes,  
 Downcast, took heaven by storm,  
 Man in love's perfect form  
 Matching the skies.

'Persist, persist  
 With verse, the exalted weaving':  
 Herbert found strength, believing  
 The hem he kissed.

Villon's wheel  
 Prayed for the scourge to stop,  
 Cried from a gallows' drop  
 What all hearts feel.

Blake drew a vision  
 Where the redeemed might live.  
 Breath, being unique, could give  
 Brightness to Titian,

Wit to the score  
 Undying Mozart made.  
 Nor could the lightning fade  
 He laboured for

In Angelo's last  
 Light-fall on face or raiment,  
 A shaft from heaven, God's payment,  
 The dice being cast.

[Jan. 1955]

## Beginning of an autobiographical poem

It was my sixtieth year proclaimed  
Heaven's joy, and secretly acclaimed  
My derivations. Never yet  
Has mortal man paid all his debt,  
And I shall now prove no exception.  
I lived at first in self-deception,  
Thinking the world, such fire was mine,  
Must hang its fate on my next line.  
The poems Milton did not write  
Kept me awake through half the night.  
Shelley enchained me like Prometheus,  
Nor could Plotinus, nor Boethius  
Deliver, since they wrote in prose,  
Chains that possessed me such as those.  
Then Blake arrived, and by equating  
Strength with sublimity, and rating  
Beauty with pathos, set me free,  
Dividing truth and falsity.

# Selected Letters to Michael Hamburger

VERNON WATKINS

\* The Garth  
Pennard Cliffs  
Near Swansea

November 12th, 1949.

Dear Michael Hamburger,

Thank you very much for your letter.

Yes, it was a pity we just missed each other. I'm so inept at finding my way about London and knowing where I am that I feel it must have been my fault. But I did manage to get to the Exhibition, with my wife and little boy, just after 11 only to discover that it wouldn't open for an hour. We waited in the large lounge until a quarter-to-twelve, but then had to go. I'm sorry.

It's kind of you to think of sending me your book of poems, and I shall look forward to it very much. What I look for first in a poet is intensity, and you have this. A poem must, for me, contain intensity in a unique form impossible to paraphrase without loss. It is found in Hölderlin constantly. But large tracts of contemporary verse derive from a speculation situation allied to lucidity of thought: – there is everything there except the soul.

I well remember meeting you in 1942. I hope you didn't have too bad a time in the Army. I was over here through the war, demobbed early in 1946, and lucky to have a very pleasant environment during the last 3 years of it.

If you come to Wales let me know. We could put you up for a week-end. Otherwise we may be up again in May next year.

Sincerely yours,

Vernon Watkins

\* All the following letters are from the same address, unless otherwise indicated.

23rd June, 1951.

Dear Michael,

Thank you very much for your letter.

We are delighted to hear your good news, and congratulate you and wish you every happiness. We are sorry, of course, not to be seeing you this summer, but there are sure to be opportunities later on. I don't expect to go to London again this year, but I can't tell for certain.

Our time since the holiday – and we both very much enjoyed our visit to your flat – has been filled with all kinds of manual labour. I spent a long time digging Earth and carrying old tin and iron and paper from place to place without knowing where to put it – Our old landlord, whom we liked very much, left everything in a state of confusion when he died just before Christmas, and I've been trying to put the place straight before it goes to our neighbours.

I'm glad you managed to get the Hölderlin book. I do rely on the text, but you must tell me what is different when we meet next. The later Patmos version has some unforgettable lines, and they do throw more light on the more coordinated version which is the best.

In poetry of the soul what is fragmentary is completed by love, and the work of art is made fragmentary by love; both revolve around the same centre, and both create themselves continually in relation to this artist who was only a medium.

I'm sorry you haven't heard from Arrowsmith. I think the poems sent to him usually have to go to America before he takes them & that accounts for the delay in hearing from him. But I shall look for your poem in 'The Listener'. I liked the one in 'Botteghe Oscure' and the Hofmannstahl translation read very well, too. Nothing can quite reproduce the effect of the original, the dark, long vowel-sounds. I'm sure Arrowsmith doesn't despise your work, and there are sensitive poets in America who know poetry when they see it.

Yes, do send the other poems later. Have you my 'Lady with the Unicorn'? I would like to give you a copy if you haven't.

Best wishes from Gwen, Yours ever,

Vernon

June 26th 1951.

Dear Michael,

Thank you very much for your letter and the poem.

The poem is beautiful and it seems to me the most resolved poem of yours that I've read. I hope you will forgive me for replying at once but I thought you would like to have my first impression of the poem. It is certainly exactly right in length, excellently balanced, and musical. I thought a good deal about your poems after leaving your flat, and I formed the impression they had continuity without always the sense of climax. The moment of climax is so important in poetry; what would Mozart's Symphonies be without it? But the most difficult thing in composition is perhaps the timing of climax; it must correspond exactly with intuition and I am sure that a poet can't do it unaided. A poet can never create such a climax within the bounds of his existing knowledge; the act of creating it increases what he knows.

The part of your poem beginning 'Island or pool' and ending 'Inhabiting illusion' is really beautiful poetry and the best I have read of yours, if you will not mind my saying so; at least it seems the best at this moment. 'Saving banks' is almost like a pun – at least it has an unfortunate connotation, but it is much too good a phrase to sacrifice.

The swan image is most successful throughout the poem. On the other hand I find the orchestra image of the second part a little strained. The trouble with the 'virtuoso nightingale' is that it is an anthropomorphic image. Without it I think the 'skylark's tremulous cadenza' would stand; but that image too is slightly influenced by 'virtuoso'. I think if you used an adjective instead it would be more effective. You would have to choose an aural one – 'silence-loving,' or something of that kind. But 'virtuoso' is too aggressive and wrong, I think, for that bird because it stresses performance too much. You want an inward image.

I don't like 'punctuate the paragraphs of time' because I think 'paragraphs' is a bookish word for that context. You want a measuring word but not a bookish one. I can't think of one. I thought of 'overtures' but that doesn't carry the idea of measurement enough.

Thank you so much for this poem.

I'll order my book for you and you should have it next month.

Best wishes from us both

Vernon

August 13th 1951.

Dear Michael,

Forgive the delay. Do dedicate *Home* to me in your next book if you are sure. It's an honour for me, but I don't want it to be an embarrassment to you, so leave it out if you have any doubt about it. A lovely poem.

You're quite right to stick to the reviews that first printed you. Personal contact is the only thing that counts in the long run. I'm sure excellent numbers of the 'New Statesman'; it is just that their attitude to poetry often seems false to me, just as I think Connolly's attitude to it is false, though he has often printed fine things. The weakness of that attitude is that aesthetic ideas are applied to metaphysical truth whereas in true poetry metaphysical truth transfigures the aesthetic ideas. I hope Connolly has changed in this and enlarged his horizon.

Best wishes to you from us,

Vernon

I hope you get a flat.

20th March 1952

Dear Michael,

Thank you very much for your letter which I was glad to have. I have forgotten what I said about the end of your 'September leaves' poem which I saw in the 'New Statesman' (I know I did make some comment) but whatever I said I feel that the last two lines, as they were printed, were right. The image recalls Rilke ('Liebeslied') but you have used it quite differently and the effect is nearer to Beethoven's music – the early Beethoven.

I hope you'll manage to get a job that you'll find congenial. I can quite understand your wish to extricate yourself from journalism. I imagine though that the critical work you write is irregular in character and that you have freedom of choice. In that case I don't feel that there's anything wrong with it. What is to be avoided is the weekly or monthly dissertation on a set of books, – the regular, commissioned review. But surely voluntary expression of enthusiasm for writers of one's own



choice must deepen one's understanding of them, just as translation in its laborious way brings to light so much that was hidden or marginal in a poem. The critic I despise is the pontifical evaluator of contemporaries, the speculator on the poetic stock exchange, the soulless investor who has never seen or heard of a widow's mite. I only despise here as critic.

My own choice of a career was made for me, but you mustn't think it would be the right choice for everybody. I would, in any case, be a hopeless journalist, especially as I am a slow reader and can hardly ever follow a plot without Gwen's assistance.

I've only read a little of the René Char book which the Princess\* sent me. The more surrealist passages don't appeal to me. It is necessary to ask sometimes: 'Is this poet being honest or is he writing for effect?' and then: 'Is the effect produced by the language a part of the poet's integrity?' I like 'Compagnie de l'Ecolière'. Some of the short poems like 'Le Taureau' have a concentrated power. But many lack form.

If we come to London in May will hope to see you. Travelling is rather a problem with three children, but will manage it somehow.

Gwen sends her best wishes to you, and I do.

Ever yours,

Vernon

22nd August, 1952

Dear Michael,

Thanks for your letter, and I'm glad you have been given the London University job, and I hope you'll like it. I was glad too to see your poem in 'The New Statesman' today – a nice poem.

You ask about the PEN anthology, but I told them last year that I would prefer anything of mine to be chosen from a periodical to the submission of Mss which seems to savour of competition. If you particularly like one of my last 'Botteghe Oscure' poems would you like to ask permission from the Princess for it? Or is there something else you would prefer? If not, and if neither alteration is desirable I don't at all mind being left out. I'm sure you'll make up a good book in any case.

\* Marguerite Caetani, editor of the Review *Botteghe Oscure*.

It's interesting that John Heath-Stubbs is going to Leeds. You must give him my best wishes.

We're expecting visitors next week, so I am writing now. Don't worry about your poems. Poems do take a hell of a long time when they want to, and then it's just better to leave them alone and turn back to them later. I saw (I think) a very stupid review of your book with one-line quotations whose potential depended so much on the context which wasn't there that the critic's comments were meaningless.

I think I've missed few reviews of contemporary poetry in 'The Listener' for several years, but I haven't seen one that was worth printing, except for its quotations. The little 'summing-up' is just not good enough; it turns sour in the ear.

I had a little bronchial catarrh during our holiday & a suggestion was made to move me from here; but I'm fine now & so we all are.

I'm so glad you liked 'Colour'. It has things about the sea which I know, but they didn't entirely come through in the broadcast, though I got it badly. The voice-echoes should be more sinister. (?)

The hold of a poem on the imagination should be too ancient for anything contemporary to shake. When it is there, it makes all theory insignificant. Mozart's Piano Concerto that I heard a few nights ago isn't just 18th Century music, as you know. It is difficult to imagine that the music hasn't always existed or that it will ever cease to exist. But such things are always a gift.

Our love to you & very best wishes for the job.

Vernon

25th November 1952

Dear Michael,

Thank you for your letter. Gwen & I are delighted with your news. I hope you manage to find a house in the country within reasonable distance of your job.

Yes, I'll remember to strike out the dedication of the poem in the proof if you haven't done so already. Princess Caetani has given permission for the poems to be used, provided that there is an acknowledgment to 'Botteghe Oscure' for both. I heard from her.

Don't be anxious or upset about your poems, or about the difficulties which lie between your writing and your lecturing. The creative impulse is generally impatient but the creative process is often slow, and what a poet sometimes mistakes for barrenness is the necessity of lying fallow. You know what I think personally about critics in this country, with perhaps two or three exceptions. I also believe that there can be no great criticism without love, and that the very nature and habit of most critics makes them incapable of an act of love. Their reputations are at stake, and they do not know what an excellent thing it would be to lose them.

Today has been bitterly cold, with a piercing East wind, but we are enjoying the luxury of a new stove.

Our love to you both. I heard from John Heath-Stubbs and he finds Leeds ugly but not uncongenial.

Ever yours,  
Vernon.

27th November 1956

...  
I am glad you have begun to write poems again; the creative thing is eventually all that matters, though intelligent criticism is valuable in itself, as a test of conscience and judgment. I read such inane statements by critics of repute, but I have never noticed that kind of thing in your own prose. Roy Fuller, for instance, called 'Fern Hill' a bad poem. That kind of statement has no meaning, either in heaven or hell, and is outstandingly meaningless in the particular little purgatory reserved for critics with distrust in the bloodstream. Honesty, as interpreted by some critics, is an unconscious attempt to reconcile the universe to the limitations of their own mediocrity. What is beyond those limitations they see as unreliable exaggeration. This is not to say that good poetry is not accessible to such critics, but it does seem to be removed to a further point from them every time they speak.

23rd April 1957

My dear Michael,

Thank you so much for your fine and impressive book, 'Reason and Energy'. Your subjects interest me greatly as you know. A certain amount I have read before, but since the book arrived I have had no opportunity to study it as we had my mother and Marjorie here for Easter and there was no time for reading at all. Still, I looked through your study of Benn\* today and I found it most interesting. I have read only one translation from him because I found myself out of sympathy in spite of the strength and edge of his style. Still, there are fine things in his work, I'm sure. I look forward to reading your book in all its detail, and particularly to the long quotations from Trakl and others, many of which seem to be new to me.

We are not likely to agree about Heine, though some of the remarks in your book that I've seen seem to be true. In the short poems which many despise I find the expression of great genius: the key to the apparent triteness of some poems is in the cadence, which is the reverse of trite. Heine's protest seems to me absolute, and closely related to profound belief, because he is near the beginning, near the act of creation at its simplest and purest. 'Perhaps not', you will say. Perhaps not, indeed; but it takes more than logic to prove it.

My only criticism, so far, of your book is that you pass relative judgment on poems. I suppose I represent the minority of one which believes that no critic does any service as to good and bad in anticipating the judgment of his readers. To present in terms of praise, which may be quantitative, or of censure, which may also be quantitative, is a different matter. Everything inimitable has something secret about it. To compare productions in terms of 'goodness', 'merit', involves a comparison of the problems set in the different works, and if that comparison is not exact and searching the other comparison will be futile. Nearly all great critics do it, of course, but it still seems to me unjustified, and I always feel uneasy when it happens, as though I ought to clap, perhaps at the wrong time.

...

\* Vernon Watkins was to translate at least one poem by Gottfried Benn – 'Fragments', included in 'Gottfried Benn: Primal Vision, New Directions, New York 1958 and 1971.

24th September, 1958.

Dear Michael,

Many thanks for your letter.

...

I am interested in all you say about the Hofmannsthal\* translations. Your duty as Editor is to detect any deviation from the original text. I understood that

1. 'Liessen alles frei' meant 'showed everything clearly' and
2. that 'Fluss' meant 'river'; but I think I mistranslated the sense of those two lines because I did not understand perfectly the meaning of 'hinab'; I see it now. But 'stream' is for me quite satisfactory for a big river. My aim is always to create poetry while reproducing the equivalent quantities of the original words if possible; to write, in fact, what Hofmannsthal would have chosen to write, had he been composing in English. I do not think 'trifling', 'trivial' or 'superficial' as good as 'negative' for 'Nichtig', partly because of the sound values of the word and partly because they point the sense too positively. I think Hofmannsthal meant 'negative'.

Of course I knew that 'verworren' meant 'confused' or 'tangled', and those were the first words I thought of; but if life is confused it is also life that brings about its confusion; therefore I did not feel that what I wrote distorted the sense. I shall think this over.

Secondly, I wrote the tenth line a great many times, using 'easy' and 'lightened' and other variants; but I think the juxtaposition of 'light' and 'heavy' must be kept. I do not myself think that 'not laden' is satisfactory, since Hofmannsthal has used only one epithet in that line.

Lastly, in line 20 I used 'plays them all through one another' precisely because I thought this the very action of interweaving threads. I did use 'weave' but altered to 'plays'. I do not think 'shuffles' is right, because that word means throwing everything to chance, but Hofmannsthal here means, surely, weaving and interweaving designedly.

I shall correct what I feel to be wrong and am most grateful to you for pointing it out. But a translation can only be judged as a poem if it is

\* Michael Hamburger edited Hoffmannsthal's book, *Poems and Verse Plays* (Bollingen Series Princeton U.S.A.), to which Vernon Watkins contributed translations.

read apart from the original. It must pass two tests. Perhaps I concentrate too much on the second.

Our love to you. I shall put in copies of the poems this evening. The Rilke translations, which I'll send later, can't be changed as I'm also sending them to Flores.

Ever yours,

Vernon

Dear Michael,

I find I cannot do better than these new versions which I enclose.

The 6th and 7th lines of *'The Youth in the Landscape'* are, I think, much better thanks to your help in pointing out my mistake. I also found that in the adjustment 'river' fitted the scansion better than 'stream'. I feel I cannot alter the other things, but please reject my version if you think it unsatisfactory. I have to do what my ear tells me in these things.

In *'Manche Freilich'* you will see that I have kept the feminine endings throughout, which I feel is much better, and I have only altered the metre in lines 13 and 14 as I don't think Hofmannsthal's metrical change in the second verse sounds right in English, whereas those two lines do.

I have changed 'light' to 'easy' in spite of what I said about the juxtaposition of 'light' and 'heavy'. Hofmannsthal means 'light' as opposed to 'ponderous', but the English word, especially with 'heads' (?) makes a rather different impression. In one version I had 'lightened', but that suggests a previous heavy burden which is not necessarily implied in the lines.

I did find, on thinking it over, that 'verworren' could mean the entanglement of life even before those 'with heavy limbs' experienced it; that is why I have moved back to 'tangled'. Thank you again.

I hope you will be able to use these, but I don't want to persuade you against your judgment. I've not written to Flores for many months, but must do soon. Would Bollingen mind his using them?

Vernon.

P.S. (Please scrap the other versions if you prefer these.)

12th November, 1960.

Dear Michael,

Thank you very much for your letter. I am sorry to be such an awful nuisance about the line from the Hofmannsthal poem. I see exactly your point, but all the alterations you have suggested, and all those I have thought of since, seem to me less good than the line as it stands, with the possible exception of:

‘Living plays them all, one through the other’

‘Plays’ is certainly better than ‘twines’ as it is a defter, quicker word, with a stronger element of light. Life behaves (?) to people’s destinies (?) like a conjuring trick, or so bewildered man often feels. The Hofmannsthal line means: ‘The destinies of others are inscrutably interwoven with mine and with each other’. But

‘Living interweaves them all together’

twines

‘Living shuffles all of them together’

‘Living twines them one into the other’

and so on, are all deeply unsatisfactory. ‘Weaves’, even with a compound prefix, cannot be used in the line following woven, and all the alternatives I have considered are either prosaic or tautological or both. I sympathise very much with your concern for the true equivalent but I still feel that you are not familiar with the sense in which I use ‘plays’ (nothing to do with playing a fishing-line) though I see that you don’t object to the word itself, but only to its apparent lack of an element of confusion. I don’t myself feel, whatever usages ‘durch-einanderspielen’ has, that that element is strong in Hofmannsthal’s line (I feel that I was at his elbow when he wrote it!). I may be wrong, but I want the monosyllable ‘plays’ & I don’t want to introduce a complication which I don’t feel the poet intended. (Living does reveal, not confuse, what destiny intended.)

We look forward very much to the chance of seeing you at the beginning of December. Dot is here on a lightning visit.

Love to you all. A suggestion for Richard’s Christmas present would be welcome.

Ever yours

Vernon

The following letter and poem were sent to Richard Hamburger, Vernon Watkins's godson, who at the age of nine contracted osteomyelitis. They were sent to him when, after a second operation, he was in hospital for nine months, encased in plaster from his feet to his chest. Michael Hamburger writes, 'To me, Vernon's humanity – attested here by his wish to console and amuse a child suffering the terrible ordeal of enforced immobility for almost a year in all – is inseparable from his poetic vocation.'

16th August 1964.

Dear Richard,

I was sorry to hear from your father that you were in hospital. I hope you will be perfectly well again soon. I wish I could see you, but we shall not be going away until about October. Perhaps we shall see you then. I hope so.

We have been to the West of America, travelling across Canada where we saw a lot of deer in the forests near the Rockies, and several times we thought we saw bears, which also live there. We came back from Montreal, down the St. Lawrence and past Belle Isle and Newfoundland, where we saw many whales and some icebergs, one about as big as the ship.

Do let me know if you want a book or anything else. Then I shall try to send it. Would you like a small set of chessmen or anything like that?

Love to you. Here is a poem which should be read rather fast, perhaps. It is on the back.

from your loving godfather,

Vernon X.



## Parable Winkle

Parable winkle  
Slipped from a crinkle,  
Dropped through the seaweed brown and wet.  
Down came the Tashai,  
Flish-eye, flash-eye,  
Caught him in the bottom of his bamboo net.

Limpet and mussel  
Tugged in a tussle,  
Tightening their grip on the slippery slab,  
Fearing the Tashai,  
Flish-eye, flash-eye,  
Greater in his grapple than the green-eyed crab.

'Flish-eye, Flash-eye,  
Flish-eye, Flash-eye,  
Prop me on top where I want to be,  
Not in that coolie  
Pearly pooly,  
Spangled with the tangles of the gulping sea.'

'No: I shall find you  
First, then wind you  
Out of your oil-bright coils within;  
Boiled, I shall bring you,  
Prong you, pring you,  
Proffered in the open on a palace pin.'

Parable winkle  
Then in a twinkle  
Saw the glint of his half-shut eye,  
Slipped as he scooped him,  
Scuttled and escaped him,  
Leaving only bubbles in the bamboo sky.

Vernon Watkins:  
Selected quotations from his letters to  
Francis Dufau-Labeyrie

In September 1936, a young Frenchman arrived in Swansea, as a student. He was also an apprentice teacher of his mother-tongue. A few months later, he met Vernon Watkins. Then a friendship that lasted a life-time struck root. It blossomed for thirty years, and even beyond. Long after Vernon's death in 1967, the flowering is still there, rich and alive. I was that young man, and now that I am on 'la pente décline des ans', I can still cull from memory and enjoy the blessed blooms and fragrance of that sturdy rose-bush planted in my prime. 'Souvenir, souvenir que me veux-tu?' wrote Verlaine, sensing perhaps how one can be assailed by the enduring vision of one's past. A memory, a vision indeed, shining through the secret, sacred domain of the heart.

F.D.-L.

October 1986

(1)

Friday [Summer of 1937]

Swansea

(I spent most of that Summer in the South-West of France. Pine forests abound in the département of Landes where Dax, my small home-town, lies close to the Atlantic Ocean. Possibly prompted by Dylan Thomas's short story, 'The Orchards', I had thought of writing a visionary tale about a fire in the forest. Here, Vernon comments on the project, which, unfortunately, never came to anything.)

Your forest must be a wonderful place. I love the resin of pines, the scent, yes, and the white tree-bodies. Did anything come of your forest-vision? And if anything did come, what was it – physical, or imaginative, or both? or merely abstract? Did you let it go, like clouds, or did you pull it to earth, like a kite?

Don't let impulse dominate you when you write a story; write from an angle contrary to your feeling and work toward it. In this way your feeling will become the more persuasive.

What a miraculous world it is, and how everything is transformed by a touch! Touch a pine and the effect is quite extraordinary – the whole nature of the tree is changed. It leaps out of a photographic world into a breathing one. Then the scent of sweet-briar – how utterly undefinable. We should touch, smell things always – do you remember our nose-journeys in the garden? They were grand, and mine still are, – the most important histories in the world.

## (2)

I had shown Dylan 'After Sunset' & I think he's given it to Keidrych [Rhys] for the 4th number of 'Wales'. But this is a new version. It was done about 3 weeks ago and has all your copy's verses, with one or two small alterations like 'Dusk. Grief of the Gods' instead of 'Grief. Dusk of the Gods', but it also has several more verses, three near the beginning, one of which I showed you – the one you didn't like. I can't resist keeping it – it seems to me necessary. Dylan, too, loved it. And, later in the poem, this:-

'Night's hush by needle parted.  
Myth's marionettes  
Cutting the strings of dread  
Map the winds' trumpets.'

From myth and superstition to science and mechanical accuracy, and then back to myth again – I had to show this. Soon after this verse –

'The myth in exile  
Killed by the starry wheel.'

I've written one or two new poems and parts and fragments of poems as well as this.

(3)

Thursday night [probably late 1937]

Heatherslade  
Pennard

I'm sorry I wrote you such a sulky, short, shabby, dirty, snarling, terrier-like bitch of a letter the other day. I had to snatch ten minutes before I caught the 'bus. Indeed I didn't resent your criticism – it is very good for me to be told such things as you told me, things not at all 'priggish' – pure observation; flattery leads to apathy, you must always tell me what you feel – I want that. Applause is dreadful – something insincere and secondary. But in the world you must know that a poet has only one need, that his poetry shall be loved. So failure rankles. Sandbag:- Indeed, nothing matters in a man except what is generous, and that's true for all acts in all ages. The mind must always learn this from the heart.

(4)

January 2nd [1938]

Heatherslade  
Pennard

Verse is a part of silence' – that comes from a thing I still haven't finished.

(5)

Friday evening [probably Spring 1938]

Swansea

(Comforting words to the often perturbed and even distressed young man that I then was.)

Don't be disillusioned about yourself and people quitting you. I've had the same experience always & I'm not disillusioned. The floor of the sea is never what you fear it to be, the bottom of the world is always miraculous, where everything we formulated is broken up into superb new emanations always exciting – nor ever an absolute nothing.

(6)

May 9th, 1938

Heatherslade  
Pennard

(A sample of Vernon's often humorous penmanship.)

I stayed there [in Laugharne] with Dylan and Caitlin (whom I'd been seeing a lot of, every other day, before I and they went away.) They were very nice. I brought small provisions like tinned fruit from Carmarthen Market but they already had a lot. And Caitlin could cook, wake up, sew, clear away, wash up, light fires and do everything I thought she couldn't do. While I was marvelling at this, I walked Richard Hughes like a very rich, bearded telegraph-post. Electric messages of an avuncular kind trickled from his beard as he stood quite still, never looking at me but straight ahead of him as if a spider were hanging half way between him and the person he was talking to. He was nice but I was glad when he went. We were all invited to dinner but I couldn't accept as I'd got to bike back.

(7)

Wednesday, August 3rd, 1938.

Heatherslade  
Pennard

My dear Francis,

You know that certain books change you in colour, exercising perhaps a green or yellow influence from their pages so that you are surprised when you look up to see the world's colours and for a moment you can't see them truly, then the trees slide through the ghost-pages into their rooted awareness and all the leaves that you have turned are at once none at all; then they become pages of a different book, one that you never read.

(8)

18th November, 1938.

Heatherslade  
Pennard

(While aware of world affairs – the more so as the trend was tragic in those anguished times preceding the Second World War – Vernon kept his distance where politics and politicians were concerned, and his comments were always guarded. On one occasion, he became impatient with the excessive language used by a mutual friend of ours regarding the world leaders of that troubled period. Hence, Vernon's following remarks.)

... the incontinent disgust at the times is itself a right disgust but it would be better to see human beings in spite of it, for their own sake, independent of all political creeds. It doesn't matter how the things came to be there: they are there. I would like a complete revolution but not the way people are asking for it. I'm so much an individualist that I feel that improvement is hardly ever organized except in educational things. I wish there were no poor, no very poor people, & I wish there were no sick people. But if there are – and there are – it is people who will help them most, whatever government there is. — Sorry about this rant. I'm 'off again'.

(9)

Thursday night [probably late 1938 or early 1939]

Heatherslade  
Pennard

I'm sorry you didn't like the little poem I sent you. I ought to confess to you that I place, in things that I write, a quite immoderate faith. You are more sensible and are able to see things in better perspective. I can never see things with cold eyes.

(10)

(This is from the same letter as the above passage. Vernon and I visited Yeats at his Dublin home in the Summer of 1938. The concern for transparency – second sentence in the passage – strangely echoes the forty-seventh verse of 'Yeats in Dublin':

'He questioned my French friend,  
And his words remain  
Shining like pebbles  
Under the flow of the Seine,  
Where Synge had walked with him,  
Where he had met Verlaine.'

That poem, I think, is perhaps a unique example of precise, conversational – and transparent indeed – interviewing-reporting in poetic form.)

Yes, I'll copy the 'Yeats' ['Yeats in Dublin'] some time for you; but I want to revise it once more first. I wish I could make it utterly transparent in surface so that the poem would shine through. In parts it does, but there are muddy bits.

(11)

Heatherslade – Monday night [probably early 1939]

(See note on (10).)

I told you I'd finished the Dublin poem. Dylan loves it, which is a great delight. He said nice things about it, called it 'one of the most truly felt' of my poems & 'one of the purest'. – he said, 'the purity is nowhere less than the poetry'. That is a good & right thing to say.

(12)

Thursday. [probably early 1939]

Heatherslade

(More comforting words – see (5). A few years earlier, Vernon had had his own racking experience of despair tearing at the mind and soul of a youth.)

My dear Francis,

Thanks for your letter. I'm sorry you were feeling fed up when you wrote it. I hope that you are now your impossible, insubordinate,

irrational, irrepressible self again, not that possible, subordinate, rational, repressed self which is moody, therefore not established. I was for many years more miserable than I like to remember, and I only became truly happy when I realized that things I had thought fixed were moving and that happiness was bound to be paradoxical. All the things that I love seem to exist miraculously in spite of the leaden and denying things which did their best to pin me down when I was a very young boy growing up. I have little use for a happiness which doesn't touch all the points of sorrow at the same time. Eliot says that human beings can only bear a very little of reality but I think man is designed to bear a great deal intuitively and very little rationally. Insofar as we believe in everything as a vision and a miracle we are capable of bearing reality and also of being intensely happy; it is because Yeats has discovered this that he has written so much poetry that I love, – lyric poetry which I find equal to any of the last 500 years. – but of course time is of no account.

(13)

January 30th, 1939

Heatherslade  
Pennard  
Nr Swansea

(Hearing of Yeats's death.)

My dear Francis,

I was glad to hear your voice last night.  
Yeats was buried to-day at Roquebrune, which I know,

(14)

I expect you were awake last night, too. What is to be said? Yeats himself has said the last word:

'Now that my ladder's gone  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart'.

At once, when I read those words, I saw a coffin, and last Sunday I read that whole poem out to W..., who was here.



Yesterday, before hearing the news, I had talked to my father a lot about Yeats's illness, about his going to Menton for the Winter. I had no actual premonition of immediate death, yet the news of his death came as no surprise. I was in this room (the windows) and Mother shouted through the partition. I said 'I know' quite evenly. When you rang up I was still in a pretty incoherent state. It is the splendour of his very latest poems and of that wonderful visit which fuse and dazzle. I am glad that he saw the first version of my poem, but I doubt whether he saw the second. A copy of this is still in Eliot's hands.

(15)

I wrote an entirely new poem quite suddenly on Sunday morning and afternoon – yesterday. I shall look at it in a few days. I know what my idea is, but in a few days a fresh look will tell me whether it has appeared coherently in the poem. It's linked with the one I sent you – 'A Lover's Words', but the metre is less lyrical, – more square-set. The chief thing I have been working on is my new poem 'A Vision of the Sea'. The first few lines were written a long time ago but now I've swung the whole into a shape, & it only wants a little chiselling to be finished.

(16)

July 7th 1939.

In the train – getting to London.

(Advice and encouragement to a very young poet.)

He had sent some poems to Keidrych [Rhys] & I had written to him a letter of advice (as I told him in the theatre 'I was really only telling you the things I'm always telling myself') telling him how to avoid imitation & try to get nearer & nearer to what he feels. He's only just 17, an age when one wants encouragement & he was significantly sitting alone. I told him not to let his poetry interfere with his other activities, – to do everything else as if he never wrote a line, because the poems when they became powerful enough, would draw him to them. I finished: 'Remember, publication is mechanical but liking is living. Look to the one, but just respect the other'. This is true always.

(17)

January 21st, 1940

Heatherslade  
Pennard.

(On dreams and anguish.)

I'm bored with the bloody war. God be praised that you've got over your delirium. There are worse fevers than yours and worse symptoms. You must have enjoyed a part, at least, of your illusions. Sometimes a dream makes you aware of regrets that make themselves invisible in waking life, a sense of such poignancy that every leave-taking seems trifling compared with it. I had such a dream two nights ago. I was glad to wake up.

(18)

(On the day Vernon and I visited W. B. Yeats in Dublin – see (10) –, we also paid a call on his sister, Miss Elizabeth C. Yeats, at the Cuala Press. She introduced to us her associates and students, all busy at their work preparing the beautifully illustrated poems and ballads contained in the Broadides.

The 'articulation in the air' mentioned further in this passage reveals much of Vernon's sense of miracle in his approach to poetic creation.)

I sent my poem ['Yeats in Dublin'] in the December 'Life & Letters' to Miss Yeats, but I haven't heard from her yet. I have never had a poem – not even 'Griefs of the Sea' which I heard coming out of the grass of the cliffs of Pennard and Hunt's Bay – in quite that way. What Yeats called an 'articulation in the air'. It was momentary and extraordinary. The whole poem took place in less than a second.

(19)

March 2nd, 1946

'Northgates'  
131 Glanmor Road,  
Sketty, Swansea.

(Vernon's critique of T. S. Eliot's latest play, then recently published.)

I don't find 'The Family Reunion' really satisfactory; it seems to get intensity by a feat, by a transposition, but a work of art should grow into intensity organically, from its own root.

(20)

April 10th, 1946

'Northgates'  
131 Glanmor Road,  
Sketty,  
Swansea.

(A gentle critique regarding a minor aspect of Dylan Thomas's poems, then just published.)

His book has been very well received, and they are certainly the most beautiful lyrical poems he has written. I do not like the very occasional word-tricks, 'once below a time', 'happy as the heart was long', because I do not think they are poetry or even Dylan Thomas, but Joyce's ghost walking. But they are tiny blemishes in grand and lovely work.

(21)

Nov. 18th, 1946

'Northgates'  
131 Glanmore Road,  
Sketty,  
Swansea.

(A critical view of A. E. Houseman's poetry, to which Vernon had introduced me.)

I'm glad you like 'A Shropshire Lad'. There are many beautiful effects, & great artistry, but the thought has a terrible limitation. The poems are musical and precise but I could never love them as I love those of Yeats. God guard me from a grief where time is uppermost, as I said in my 'Prayer against Time', because that kind of grief destroys a poet's vision.



# Aphorisms

JAN LE WITT

Time and again we attempted to draw water out of stone and failed dismally.  
Next time we must try wine.

\* \* \*

Nature is as old as the world, environment is a modern invention.

\* \* \*

At sunrise illusion preaches infinity – at sunset doubt writes its testament.

\* \* \*

In the beginning there was land sea and air.  
In the beginning truth was growing on high stalks.  
In the beginning there was innocence – the first smile  
of the world. The first smile of the world was a cry.  
The last smile of the world will it be secret joy?

\* \* \*

Legend is gossip in mothballs.

\* \* \*

When God designed the onion, once He had put the finishing touches to the  
multiple petticoats He gave it a bonus – a whiff of bitter-sweet tears, and smiled  
rather distantly.

\* \* \*

The roll of drums reverberates in the dream, shipwreck lies on the shores of  
reality. Look what reality has done to the dream of Icarus.

\* \* \*

Who – besides Homo Sapiens – deserves to be hanged on the Tree of Knowledge?

\* \* \*

The young dream forwards. The old dream backwards.  
Daydream labours twenty four hours a day.

\* \* \*

Dream – the royal road to the unconscious, Herr Doktor Freud's nocturnal autobahn on which the tramp and the nightwatchman travel by day and the king by night.

\* \* \*

Silence is a white rose motionless.  
Silence is the calm that engulfs innocent sighs.  
Silence is sound carried to the precipice of the white night.  
Silence the twenty-one-gun salute of fragrance.

\* \* \*

Resonance – a perfume that refuses to leave the room when the musicians have departed.

\* \* \*

The stem of the rose bitterly resents the contention that it served as a prototype for barbed wire.

\* \* \*

Ethics is life with strings attached, morality is life with ropes attached.

\* \* \*

Man goes to the open seashore for a whiff of hedonism.  
Man goes to the shade of the Temple to measure his humility,  
control his passions, wipe the dust off his soul.

In freedom-loving Dreamland the saintly turn polygamous and the virtuous promiscuous.

\* \* \*

Am I breaking an eleventh commandment by freeing my soul from the chains of illusion and with a cool eye accepting this world for what it is – a ship sailing on dry land?

\* \* \*

In New York City even God feels provincial and He looks it.

\* \* \*

The pious, those on familiar terms with God, demand of Him services they would not dare ask of a charwoman.

\* \* \*

Revenge, sweet revenge, what dose is permitted to the diabetics among the avenging angels?

\* \* \*

It was God who created beggars. The idle rich are the product of human ingenuity.

\* \* \*

Angels' wings are distributed to introverts, extroverts just grab them.

\* \* \*

Dispute the notion that animals tend to be imitative of humans. Man invented the underdog but the dog reciprocated by inventing the superman.

\* \* \*

The impatient want their to-morrow today. The greedy want two to-morrows in one day. The nostalgic offer four new dawns for one patina-covered yesterday.

\* \* \*

When one side of the coin opts out of the monetary partnership and the squinting shekel loses half its capital value – that's inflation.

\* \* \*

The fig leaf is a misplaced garment to which by right an obscene face ought to have first priority.

\* \* \*

In salesmanship the flutterings of faint butterfly language are to no avail, the brazen dialect of advertising alone may succeed in turning the transparent fig leaf into a bestseller.

\* \* \*

In a dictatorship freedom is dispensed in homoeopathic doses. The ruler, tenderly caring for the wellbeing of his subjects, decreed interalia that on no account should the populace be exposed to an overdose of liberty as it might have undesirable side-effects.

\* \* \*

Double standards are a wise precaution; when one capsizes the other takes over.

\* \* \*

The Song of Hate imposed on a people is frequently drowned in the drumbeat. The Song of Freedom residing in the hearts of a people is frequently informed by *duende*.

\* \* \*

The hand sees even in the dark.  
The fist is blind even at mid-day.

\* \* \*

Like sea-water, tears are salty and unpalatable; yet some cruel souls are continuously quenching their thirst with the tears of others.

\* \* \*



Seeing is believing but believing is more than seeing – it is insight.

\* \* \*

Adamant: the most recalcitrant member of the Adam clan.

\* \* \*

The ready-made 'yes' of the yes-man proliferates amidst the herbaceous borders of ennui and copycat conformity.

\* \* \*

When pupils in the classroom first hear the verdict pronounced: two and two make four, the more sensitive ones contain their anger by counting to ten.

\* \* \*

The scapegoat will carry your load of blame no matter how heavy yet no force on earth will compel him to yield a drop of milk.

\* \* \*

God I forgive you this world as I forgave Hamlet Prince of Denmark his morbid motherlove because the glance of his eyes has the force of sunbeams.

\* \* \*

Yesterday's shepherds are today's traffic wardens. Amidst the congested desolate scenery of the big city one searches in vain for a Virgil to emerge from the ranks of the ever watchful souls.

\* \* \*

Beware, memory can be a strangler.

\* \* \*

Because of the misuse of superlatives the strongest words in the lexicon have since lost half their purchasing power. Some are already resorting to double talk in order to make up for the deficiency.

\* \* \*

Wearing the seven-league boots of unbridled progress human society is continuously advancing backwards.

\* \* \*

Nostalgia: the generous coat of varnish we tend to apply as an afterthought to the fading memory of yesterday.

\* \* \*

According to the Financial Times' price index pig iron is holding firm at 45.5 whilst imagination has slumped to a new low at today's quotation of 0.01.

\* \* \*

Genesis – was it really a six days' wonder or is it a continuous process happening every day, every hour, every instant?

\* \* \*

Memory is an inveterate smuggler.

\* \* \*

Some hearts heal with a mere gesture.  
 Some are perennially padlocked.  
 Some outsilence themselves.  
 Some beat in unison with the bluebells.  
 Some sell hope by the yard across the counter.  
 All hearts carry mysteries in their rucksacks.

\* \* \*

There is a lingering suspicion that the other side of the coin may turn out to be not unlike the other side of the mirror.

\* \* \*

# Winifred Nicholson's Flowers

KATHLEEN RAINÉ

It must be nearly fifty years since I found myself in the Leicester Gallery looking at paintings by Winifred Nicholson, and with astonishment wondering who this painter was who saw and understood north-country flowers as I thought only I knew them. But although I have indeed loved those Northern flowers, that Northern light (much of my childhood was spent in Northumberland, adjacent to Winifred's Cumberland), I tell this memory not as something that could happen only to one person but for quite the opposite reason: it is what anyone might feel before Winifred's paintings – all those at least who respond to a certain range of feeling, a certain note, or key. In the same way do we not even with Shakespeare wonder less at what he knew than that he has expressed what we know? So with Mozart or Bach we marvel as each note falls right, falls as we know it must be. It is the gift of true art, whether the greatest or relatively minor, to give us not the artist's individual vision but to open our own. Such work always seems wonderfully simple, like a memory of something once known and since forgotten, like childhood or paradise. The clever, the experimental, the doctrinaire lacks this quality, which is an insight of the imagination. Winifred Nicholson's work has this truth – very much a woman's truth, but not for that reason limited.

Later Winifred was to become a friend until the time of her death. Often we spent working periods together, in the Hebrides, in Ireland, at her home in Cumberland, Bank's Head, a farm-house built with the stone of the mile-fort on the Roman Wall on whose site it stood. Later I had a small cottage near her. I knew her at work and value those times in retrospect as perhaps the happiest of my own life and the most productive. For to be near Winifred was to be with a totally committed artist, for whom each day shed its light on a new theme for a painting. The ever-changing light of the seasons, the flowers, the weather, the arrivals and departures of children and grand-children, all these gave her what she called the 'stories' of her paintings, in which she captured

the day, the hour, and ever-fleeting present. Every painting is such an irrecapturable moment of life – she painted fast, each canvas the work of a morning or afternoon, some worked over perhaps next day or the day after, but never laboured over in a studio for weeks or returned to after some here and now had vanished. She painted much in the open air and in all endurable weathers. I remember her painting one midsummer late evening on the Isle of Eigg and returning with a canvas invisible because of the multitudes of midges sticking to it; the painting became visible a few days later when the midges had been brushed off. On Orkney it was blowing sand in the unceasing wind, or it might be heat or cold, but none of these deterred her.

By ‘stories’ she meant nothing social or illustrative but what nature (she was essentially a painter of nature and above all, of flowers) tells, communicates as a mood, one of the infinitely varied ways of feeling and being evoked by landscape and changing light. A bunch of flowers, picked by some artless hand, and placed perhaps in a window, open on summer or closed against storm, would provide a focus for a complex feeling-theme made up of many elements. She loved and understood above all the moods of her native Cumberland, its long summer evenings lit by a northern sun, the contrast of bright summers and storms of autumn, or the sheltering indoors that keeps out the wildness of winter cold; the luminous grey light of cloudy days, the first promise of spring. Many of her paintings unite indoors and outdoors, flowers that have been grown and tended, or picked in garden or field, so that there is always a humanised nature, a relationship not merely her own but of all those lives that have come together to create a here and now where a few casual flowers in a glass tell of the flow of life in some room that is a true ‘place’ of life. ‘The flowers have the look of flowers that are looked at’. They tell the ‘story’ of the lookers and not only their own.

Winifred did also write stories, and her published book *Flower Tales* illuminates this gift she had of reading the ‘stories’ of the flowers she painted. They are of the genre of Hans Andersen, whose flowers told their stories to Little Gerda in *The Snow Queen*. Besides these she always had some fantasy-romance running in her mind during the many hours she had to rest on her back (as she had to do from childhood, and following an injury to her spine before the birth of her first son). Of an evening after work I would read her such poems as I had written and she new pages of her latest story, which would take up the special



Nursery Bunch



Allwoodii Pinks



Acidanthera

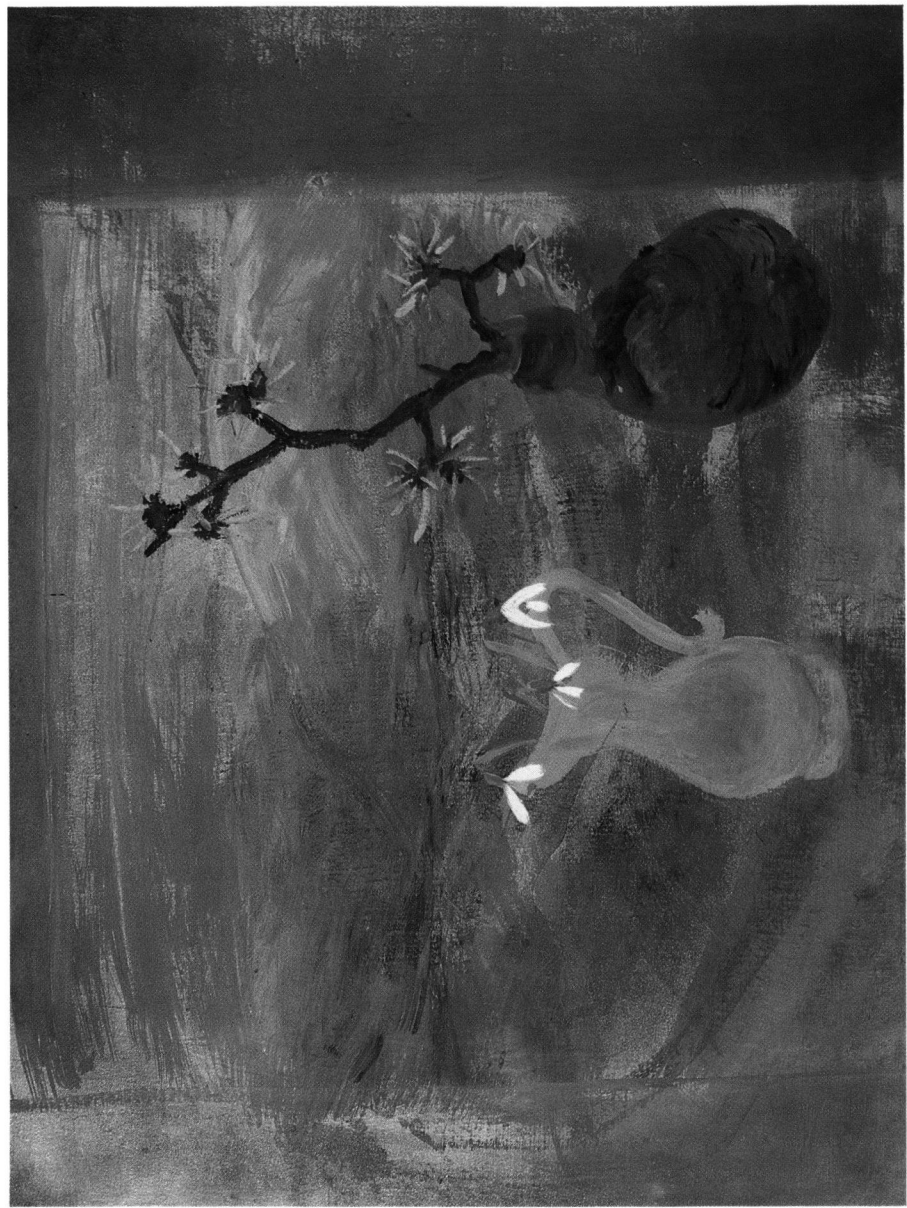


Flowers in pots, Dulwich





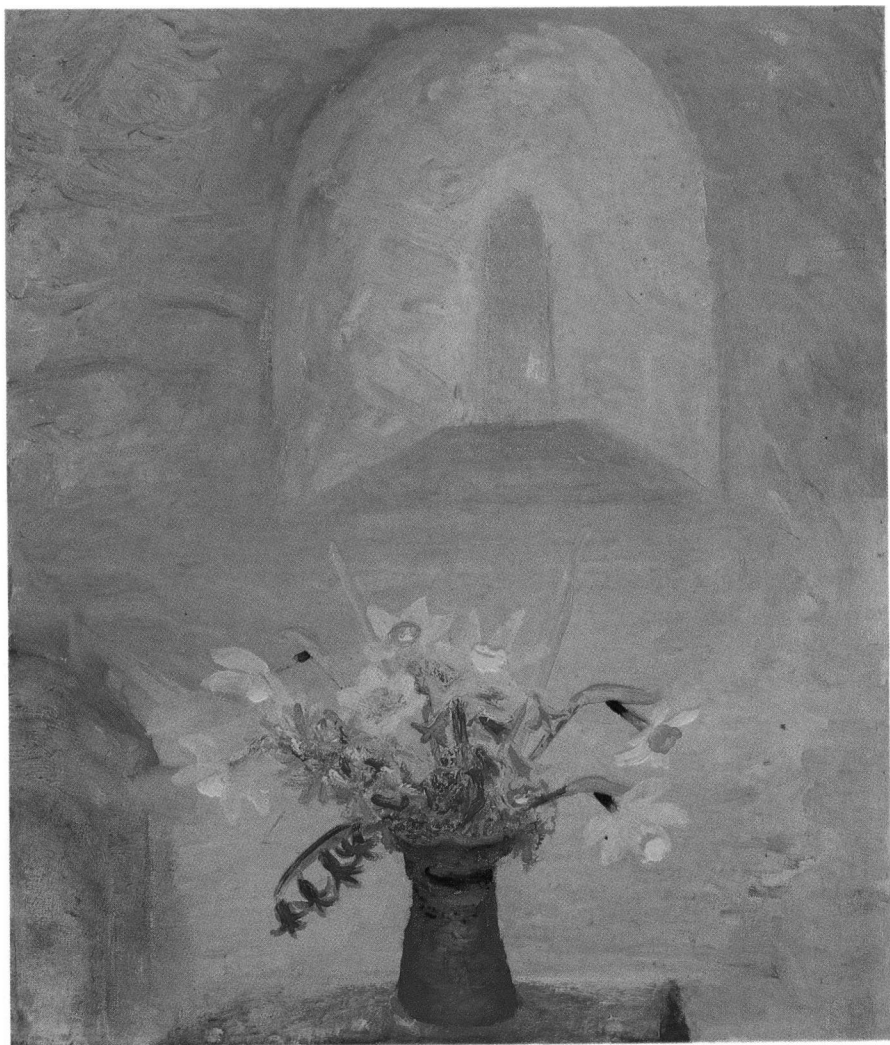
Greek Gold



Snowdrops and Wintersweet



First Prismatic



Narcissi and Bluebells

character of whatever place she was living in at the time. Yet Winifred was no solitary dreamer but, on the contrary, accustomed from childhood to the comings and goings of a great country house (she spent much of her childhood at the home of her grandparents, the Earl and Countess of Carlisle) and later in her house, Bank's Head, there was always a flow of children, grand-children, gardener, helpers of various kinds, tenants and country neighbours, friends. A world of permanence and continuity where all was indeed 'in place'.

Winifred Nicholson has been criticised for that pristine, pastoral, unsullied paradisaical quality of her work, as depicting a world too good to be true, lacking the alleged merit of 'facing up to' the stark 'realities' of the times she lived in. It is true that she paints an age-old stable rural world that is increasingly under threat, and for many only a dream of a past they never knew, a world simpler and kinder than the industrial nightmare we have created. But is not that vision of beatitude the norm, the 'reality' we all wish were so, that in certain happy moments we have entered unawares and with a sense of familiarity, of homecoming, when a geranium in a window-box or a wild flower in a hedgerow or a crack in a pavement has suddenly seemed for a moment still in paradise? For paradise is (or so every mythology has it) not a lost illusion but what should have been, once was, could be again were we to see the world (as Traherne says) 'aright'. Occasionally we elude ourselves and we are there. She was well aware of the fragility of these privileged moments but valued them as glimpses of what is more, not less real than our anxious mundane vision. She always said she wanted her pictures to be 'either a lamp or a window', a source of light. She had suffered much in her own life (Ben Nicholson, whose first wife she was, had left her and their three children, though she never ceased to the end of her life to keep faith with him). For her, the paradisaical vision was reality itself, the formless and the unilluminated a failure to keep that reality clearly before the eyes of the imagination. The purpose of art is to remind us of this reality. We never, after all, feel at home in our hells, always in exile from some other state or place which is truly ours. As Yeats writes:

Quattrocento put in paint  
 In background of a god or saint  
 Gardens where the soul's at ease –  
 Palmer's phrase – but after that  
 Confusion fell upon our thought.

Winifred saw no reason to paint that confusion, and her paintings are healing, like Palmer's little dells and nooks and corners of paradise.

Following ill-health in her youth Winifred Nicholson became (after her marriage) a Christian Scientist; and some might find in this again support for the view that she refused to confront the tragic side of life, the Christian Mystery of the suffering Christ, the 'descent' of the divine principle into the dark world of generation. Yet Christian Science is grounded in a popularised version of the American Transcendentalist movement which is in its turn grounded in Neoplatonism. Winifred understood the writings of Mary Baker Eddy in a manner all her own, which indeed took her back to the underlying Neoplatonic hierarchic disposition of the universe, universal Spirit as the first cause, reflected in the individual world of the soul, with the material world as the lowest effect of higher causes; and not, as according to popular naïve materialism, itself a causal agent. She was interested in Indian philosophy – she had, in 1918, before her marriage, accompanied her father, Charles Roberts, Secretary of State for India for Asquith's Liberal Government, to India, and many of her Indian drawings survive. Coming as she did from a family in which Liberal politics was paramount, she herself was by no means detached from such matters. Her grandmother, Rosalind, Countess of Carlisle had been a friend of Gladstone and an influential political figure and campaigner for votes for women. Her grandfather, the Earl (George Howard) was a gifted painter, and friend of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, of Tennyson, William Morris and others of that world and more concerned with the arts than with politics. It was from him that Winifred received her first lessons and encouragement in painting; and, different as her technique may be, there is something in the pre-Raphaelite vision in her concern with beauty; and indeed in her use of colour. But there was besides in her a strong streak of 'the Radical Countess' – the ease with which she took her part in her world, her sense of the part woman has to play and the special contribution she has to make. Her marriage with Ben was, from the point of view of their art, on an equal footing, and that Ben took her seriously as a fellow-artist meant much to her. On one occasion I remember remarking to Ben (reproachfully as I intended it) that he had been married to two very remarkable women. 'I know', he replied, 'from Winifred I learned a great deal about colour, and from Barbara (Hepworth) a great deal about form'. Thinking the matter over



much later I realised that, far from having felt these words as lacking in humanity both these women artists would have been glad of his appreciation.

Winifred certainly learned much in the course of her sixteen years with Ben. He took her from a world rich indeed in its heritage from the past, but also burdened and limited by that heritage. Ben Nicholson was in all things modern, regarding the past as a burden to be shed. For Winifred, even though her work retains so much of an enduring English, traditional way of life and its skills and values, this was a liberation. All must be made anew, their work, their lives. (Perhaps Christian Science appealed to her because religion too must be new). The years working with Ben and the friend who at that time made a third with them in their lives as artists, Christopher Wood, were for her formative. She made a number of abstract paintings and worked to master the principles of abstract composition. Contrary to general opinion it was possibly she who led Ben in working out the abstract idea. Mondrian and Brancusi were friends during her years in Paris, to whom she introduced Ben. Characteristically, while Ben thought in terms of circle and square, Winifred's 'abstracts', though some of them powerful geometric shapes, tended towards feminine ovoid forms; and in the centre of one abstract ovoid, there is an ear of corn laid, Ceres-like, as a promise of growth and birth. There was much mutual influence among these painters, Winifred learning freedom from Ben, and from Christopher Wood something of his resounding deep colours. From both she learned to be always open, always experimenting. In her eighties a scientific friend gave her a prism, rejuvenating her long-standing interest in prismatic colours which she had begun increasingly to use in her painting – haloes of liberated light rather than flat surfaces and coloured 'object'. She was always venturing into new regions of imaginative insight and new ways of seeing more deeply into the mystery of appearances we know as 'nature'.

About colour Winifred was technically highly professional; more, she had a profound understanding of colour as a language in which nature itself communicates meanings and values. On the first occasion on which I stayed with her at Bank's Head she had been reading a book on Goethe's theory of colour, (*Pure Colour*, Nos 5, 6 and 7 of 'Towards a New Culture' Publications, 1946) and she was full of it, finding in Goethe's ideas confirmation of much she in practice had discovered.

The essential difference between the Newtonian theory of colour and Goethe's is that the former attributes colour to the 'particles' of light – the material object – whereas for Goethe it is a function of sight; in which view he is returning to that of Plotinus for whom sight implies a 'sun-like' quality in the eye. Flowers, in which nature displays with such virtuosity its whole spectrum, were, for Winifred, for that reason, an instrument attuned, as it were, to discoursing in the music of colour, as a musician juxtaposes the notes of his scale, to produce melody and harmony. Flowers, for her, were not solid objects, coloured, but in the most literal sense made of light. One may follow in her development from colour-harmonies of great refinement even in her earliest work, a progressive liberation of light from the object – or rather, the resolution of the object into light. She came more and more to understand light as that from which objects – all we see – are made. At death, she came to think, we will be freed entirely into that self-luminous world (perhaps AE's 'many-coloured land') and in her latest paintings she is already venturing imaginatively into that awaiting world.

It would not be true to say that for her flowers were mere pretexts for her virtuosity in the use of colour – far from it, she never saw them without a renewal of wonder at these epiphanies of a paradisaical world ever renewing itself before our eyes. For her painting was not so much a language in which to describe nature, as nature itself a language in which the mystery tells itself. Her technical skill was consummate, but not an end in itself – it was a means of stating in visual form an experience of nature as an epiphany, a universe continually opening from a sacred source 'the centres of the birth of life' as Boehme and Blake described it. Of this perpetual epiphany flowers are at once expression and symbol.

On the technicalities of the painter I am not qualified to write; but in some ways poet and painter are confronted with similar problems. Certainty was, for Winifred, the hall-mark; so much inferior painting is, as she said, 'dense with doubt' for the painter has no clear vision of what is to be painted. Her own eye was superbly selective, with a sense of what to keep and what to omit, comparable with those Japanese flower-painters whose work she greatly admired, and of these many were women. I remember explaining to her that much of the art of poetry lies in leaving out unnecessary words, and that my own difficulties were never the main images but small words like 'the' or



'and' or 'of' – whether to include or to omit. She got up and put the tip of her finger on an almost imperceptible white brush-mark in a grey sky, background to a painting she had made in Greece of an asphodel, also mainly white. 'You see?' she said, 'it makes all the difference'. Indeed that unnoticed brush-mark held the composition in balance. It was when she was not working at the height of her powers that a certain formlessness crept into her paintings of 'nature' as if she was then relying not on her painter's eye but on the object she was looking at to tell her what to paint.

That asphodel was growing near the Heraion, not far from Mycenae, where she often went to paint. She did not paint the temple or the goddess but the 'story' of the asphodel included these; as did her red lilies the 'story' of the Minoan civilisation of Crete. She had a great fondness for archaeology and ancient civilisations whose thought was visual rather than literary. David Jones admired her work, perhaps because of the implicit assent it gave to his rhetorical question:

If one is making a painting of daffodils what is not instantly involved? Will it make any difference whether or no we have heard of Persephone of Flora or Blodewedd? I am of the opinion that it will make a difference.

To Winifred it certainly did make a difference. Her world of reference was not the same as David Jones's, nor did she think in terms of Christian or any other liturgical symbolism. But in her paintings of asphodels or lilies the goddesses of Greece are dissolved, in her paintings of Northern flowers the Border Ballads of her ancestors and all that is traditional and pastoral in a feudal and rural inheritance; in a Roman hyacinth against a snowy winter landscape is her fidelity in a love that asks nothing but that its dream may still flower even when the remover has removed. She is a painter of feeling whose strength, depth and generosity is the measure of the fullness and greatness of her humanity.

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A book of paintings, writings and letters by Winifred Nicholson, titled *Unknown Colour*, is to be published by Faber & Faber in May 1987, at £30. It will contain more than one hundred colour reproductions.

# Greening Refreshment

## The Flower Paintings of Winifred Nicholson

JOHN LANE

The day I visited Banks Head shoals of flowers, multitudinous snowdrops, overspread the grass in the garden which had been her delight. Across the valley, the immense green valley, the distant, shadowed shoulder of Tindale Fell rose against the sky. Whiteness of snowdrops, a white northern light; the secret intimacy of flowers in the foreground; the elemental vastness of far-flung fells and skies: these were her world, the country of her imagination.

For Winifred Nicholson, the wonder of creation was never an esoteric thing, remote, calculated, difficult, but immediately and perpetually perceptible. 'I feel that every living thing, from man to the smallest flea is a creative being' she wrote. It is not surprising that the poet and painter David Jones remarked that Winifred painted not flowers but 'her wonder'.

'Wonder-making' found its most luminous expression in a huge body of her work – mostly oil-paintings – designed for rooms not galleries, still unrecognized, but as fresh and lived, as companionable, as on the day they were made. Hers is a happy art, radiant, without a trace of suffering; often unpeopled but never aloof from human concerns. It is, too, an art of the greatest subtlety and sophistication with an intensity of direct observation and a feeling for paint almost as refined, impassioned, unfettered, as that of Matisse.

Winifred Nicholson had, of course something in common with several painter-contemporaries – with Christopher Wood for example – but she always followed her own path; she was, like Bonnard, an original. In innumerable Edenic images, reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence's 'pale gold great bubbles' of kingcups and 'scalloped splashes of gold' of the lesser celandine, she celebrated her feeling for the vivid consciousness of life expressed in flowers.

Sometimes in the scale and warmth of her spirit, Winifred Nicholson resembles a much earlier writer, the twelfth-century Abbess (and composer) Hildegard of Bingen, who made up the word *viriditas* or greening power. She wrote that all creation and humanity in particular is 'showered with greening refreshment'. 'In the beginning', she relates, 'all creatures were green and vital; they flourished amongst flowers'. Here surely is a sacramental vision of earth's ancient sweetness, its capacity for renewal, a sense of 'the dearest freshness deep down things', with deep similarities to Winifred Nicholson's.

In her long life Winifred Nicholson painted many sensitive abstracts (in Paris where she lived in the 'thirties), some delightful portraits and a host of deeply original sea and landscape paintings in Wales, in the Hebrides, in Cornwall and Greece. She also visited Morocco and Tunisia. But for all their manifold qualities it is my conviction that few of these rivalled her paintings of flowers, both wild and of the garden – and the exotic too delighted her. These are works in which her feelings for 'earth's lush greening', her inspirational vision, reached its most glorious expression. It was as if gazing at 'the wild flowers of Cumberland, Lugano, of Mycenae which have inspired me' she became the thing she saw. She wrote (speaking in the person of the flower) 'Their silence says to me, "my rootlets are moving in the dark, in the wet, cold, damp mud – My leaflets are moving in the brightness of the sky – My flower face has seen the darkness which cannot be seen and the brightness that is too bright to see."'

It is in these paintings of flowers, with their child-like simplicity of composition and disingenuous painterliness, that Winifred Nicholson expresses her love of earth and home. These are deeply nurturing pictures, of growth, of birth, of healing. More in the world of mother and grandmotherhood than in the world of eros, that love shares the wonderfully affirmative painterliness of Matisse, of whom Derain said: 'I believe he is opening the gate to the seventh garden, the garden of happiness.' Such happiness, such harmonious joy, is most beautifully expressed in her *A Nursery Bunch* of 1927 (Plate 1) where the paint is employed with a flowing pleasure and the colours sing with the purity of flowers. Winifred Nicholson is always a celebrant.

She painted flowers for many reasons, not least their magical simplicity, their miraculous economy. She was devoted to them because they 'have the most living colours that we know on this earth'

and loved them, too, for their 'this-ness', the quality Duns Scotus called *hacceitas*, the sense of distinctive, individuality which made an individual thing or creature what it was. *Alwoodii Pinks* of 1930, (Plate 3) is a case in point. I have passed this painting many hundreds of times; each time its intensity of attention has called forth something of my own – a response compelling, not observation, but participation. A wild note has been sounded. The colours burn; sharp red, dissonant pink against a field of pungent tremulous green. Yet the painting 'holds' by reason of the stillness at its core. The artist has entered by love into union with the Life who dwells and sings in the essence of these flowers.

Because of her domesticity Winifred Nicholson has been regarded (in so far as she has been regarded at all) as an intimiste. So she was. But she was also a visionary with an ecstatic vision of the ordinary, seeing, as John Smith observed, that one may always 'suck Divine sweetness out of every flower'. This sweetness was also inherent in her feeling that she and the earth were of one mind. 'Poppies are red', she saw, 'because as individual living things they enjoy being red in the harvest field, crimson in the field of vision'.

The search for colour, colours that danced in light, 'dream colours sometimes memory colours', became from the start central to a life's quest; a work for which she never ceased to speak and write with enthusiasm. It was, indeed, in colour, rather than form, colour liberated from description, from recognisable objects, from the shackles of utilitarian fact (and rationalism) that Winifred Nicholson saw a pictorial future of unexplored possibilities. There were, she knew, so many colours not yet perceived; so many visual sonorities to explore: 'Can we not let eyes free to see, to behold, what has not yet been seen of the spiral river of light?' She likewise enjoyed the more familiar hues whose possibilities, in combination, were no less exciting than these: 'Pink and turquoise and mother of pearl,' she writes, and red 'the taunting flame of primal volcano'; green, too, 'green as swift as the sting of a viper,' and blue, blue like 'the lark's song, hope that soars into the stratosphere'. There was also violet 'whose magic is perceived only by keen-eyed men, but is known by the song birds and honey bees,' and black which 'to a beetle, to a panther, to a black berry is a fine lustre'. She also wrote about red and green, the complementaries: 'see the huntsman in red gallop through the green wood,' and of 'orange and gold and lemon and primrose each singing into luminosity'. Like

all the greatest colourists Winifred Nicholson occasionally restricted her palette to a dark, tenebrous chord as in *Snowdrops and Winter Sweet* of 1970 (Plate 7), a painting of death and resurrection. Here, she looks towards the shoulder of Tindale Fell (her Ben Bulben, her Mont St. Victoire) seen charcoal-dark against the sprightliness of vivid, sparkling Hamamelis and the cool mother-of-pearl whiteness of a pot of snowdrops – the flowers of Candlemas – painted with that ‘curious loving in what’s near’ so characteristic of her best paintings. The phrase is Thomas Blackburn’s and comes, appropriately, from a poem called *Hallowed*.

Such vision, sharing something of the intensity of those mystics and poets Boehme, Oetinger, Goethe – for whom colours were the radiations, prefigurations, signatures, of heavenly and spiritual things lay behind all her greatest work; it is the central inspiration of her last paintings. In her eighties when lesser spirits would have been content with past achievement, Winifred Nicholson returned to an early interest in the rainbow-spectrum and began to investigate the world of light (and the edges of perception) by means of a small prism.

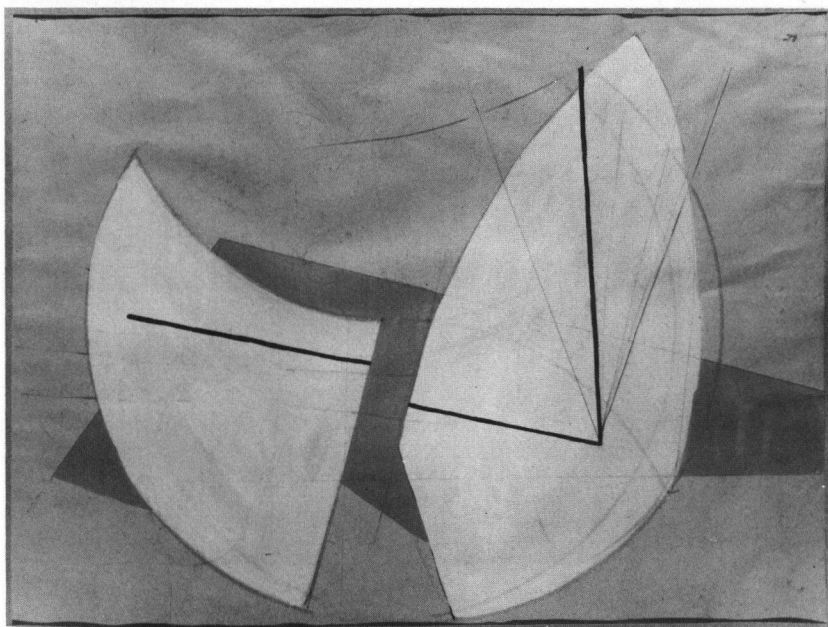
Plate 8, *First Prismatic*, is as its title suggests, the first of this series of investigations, amongst her most beautiful creations. Here we join with her in looking (from another window at Banks Head) into the heart of a neighbouring beech. It is late winter (1977) but the still unopened buds seen through her flashing prism are flaming with an ethereal rainbow iridescence, like candles at a shrine, like a bed of crocus, like sparks of light, like the Paradise of which Traherne wrote ‘The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap’. In this rapturous painting of the ‘deep and infinite’ revelation of the beauty of the spiritual order, Winifred Nicholson expressed her own joy of the holy, of the numinous, revealed through colour.

‘Colour’ she felt, ‘is seen in growing things living the life of the rainbow curve, the sevenfold spectrum’. And again at the age of eighty-eight but no less magically (and with a diamond sharpness for those who read her life aright): ‘We keep our Eyes at the back of our eyes and can divide and dissect the rainbow so long as we look inward and not only outward.’

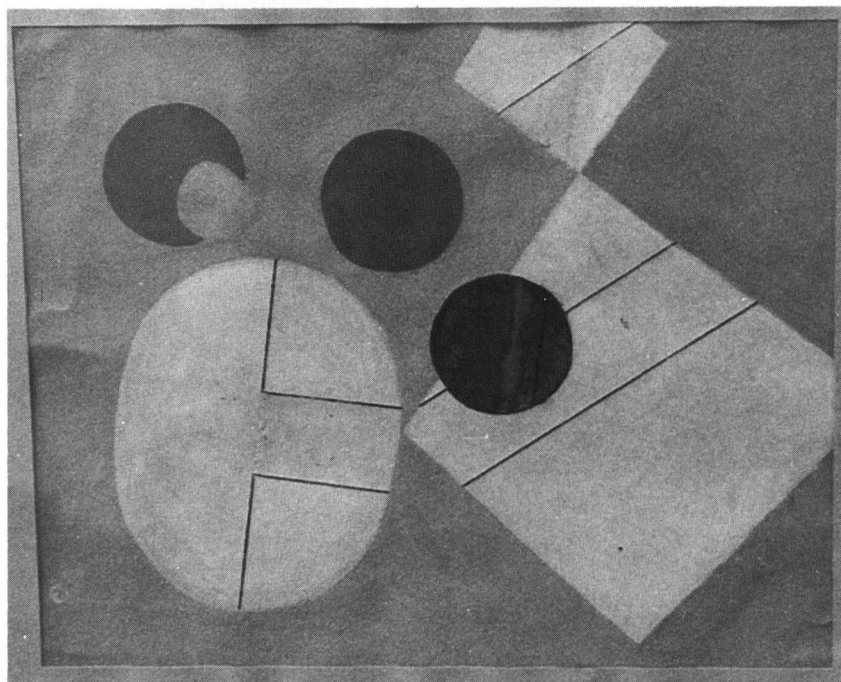
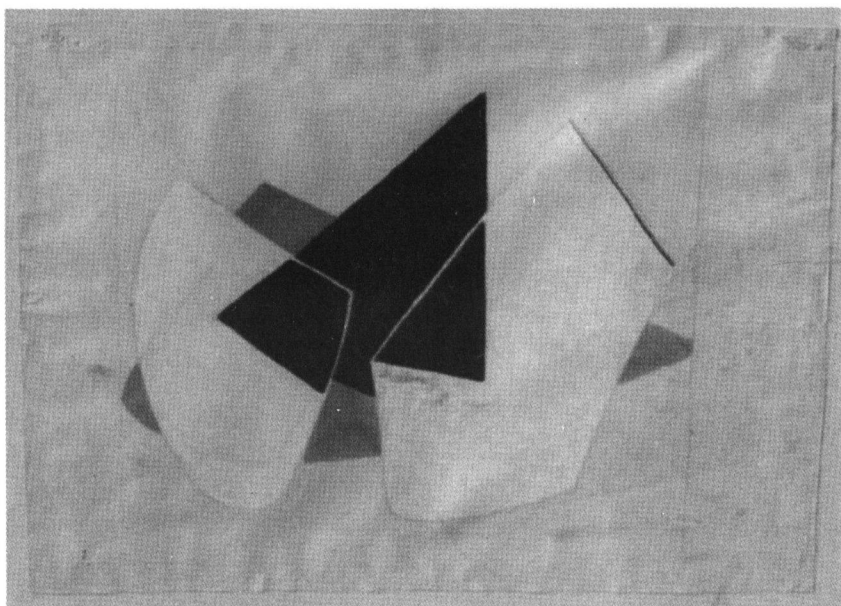
## Abstract Sequence

About 1935, while living in Paris, Winifred Nicholson was working with the Dutch constructivist painter Domila. She made a series of forty drawings and paintings, moving from a representational painting of flowers made in 1921, into abstraction, derived from these natural forms. The drawings that follow are from that series in which Winifred Nicholson explored a variety of formal resolutions of the possibilities opened up by a process of simplification derived from the original flowers in pots and paper wrappings.











## Writings about Painting

WINIFRED NICHOLSON

### When I shut my eyes

I think of colours. Not of people, their faces nor their places, but of colours – sometimes dream-colours, sometimes memory-colours. I recollect Red – men in red coats marching, rows and rows of them marching interminably, and then an open carriage with a small fat lady in deep black . . . No crown, but I was told she was a queen – an empress queen – and that all the red marching men were marching for her.

I recollect Red and Green. I was painting at a table in a high-up attic room, and a man came in with my grandfather. He said: 'Let me show you how to paint, little girl', and I said: 'Go away, old man, I know how to paint,' and afterwards my grandfather blamed me. 'That was Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema', he said, 'the head of the Royal Academy.' My grandfather, George Howard, Earl of Carlisle, very seldom blamed me. We sat by the log fire on a William Morris carpet in our Border Castle, and read 'The Water Babies' and Froissart's Chronicles – and we walked hand in hand in the glens and the woods. I can smell the vivid green of the moss under the grey trunks of beech trees and see their young spring leaves dancing in the wind. 'That is the colour of Angels' wings', he told me. 'It is so, for Dante says it is.'

Green is not a colour that can be painted. It is a living hue that cannot be reproduced by pigment. That is why I stood in Awe and Wonder with Ben in Paris in front of the first Picasso we liked: it was abstract. Of course, I do not remember its shapes, but there was in it an emerald green as vivid and as quick as a viper. Towns have no dewy green in them; that is why I cannot paint in towns.

As I worked in my Art School I discovered another colour that cannot be painted. I was painting the iridescence on a shell ('What colours you are seeing today, Roberts', said my art master, Byam Shaw,

in disapproval.) I saw the colour Magenta on the edge of the rainbow. Violet, wicked witch! Much Violet is ruin; the Circe that turns all one's pictures into swine. Without Violet or a vestige of it the picture is bland, even blank.

I saw Violet in India, in the gossamer transparency of sarees, in white marble palaces, in white sunlight – in the purple robe of dark bodies in the darkness of great olive-greenery of giant evergreens. Then later, in Paris, I saw that that master of colour, Matisse, was master of witchcraft of Violet.

You can have as much Yellow as you want in a picture – the more the better, as Bonnard tells. You can have as much Blue as you wish, as Van Gogh told Gauguin – in fact, you can only have a true telling sky blue if you have a great deal of Blue, as Gauguin told Van Gogh in his letter reply. Green is a delight that is inexpressible. Violet is a state secret – the secret of the sevenfold Rainbow. She holds a Magenta on her verge that few human eyes can distinguish. If you were to become a Bee or a Singing Bird you would not fail to see it. If we could look at pictures as Birds or Butterflies look at the world, we should not fail either to see that Lilac, and who knows what other colours as well?

*Catalogue of Exhibition at Crane Kalman Gallery, 1972*

### Three Kinds of Artists

The eyes of one kind of painter look outward. The eyes of another look inward to the recollections that dwell in the recesses of the mind.

I'm the first kind. But at one time I ventured into that territory which is uncharted visually and depends upon calculations of visual experience.

I was living alone in Paris and all around me the art world was calculating and seeking by their calculations the basic reason for art, the primal forces that built it. They sought such a primal force in geometry; in the circle, the rectangle, the triangle, and their juxtaposition to one another.

No compromises, no wobble-wobble.

In colours: primal red, primal blue, primal yellow – no green, no neutrals: such tones and colours were impure and decadent. Only the

three primal colours were valid. Nothing romantic, just the responses of primal forces one to another.

Piet Mondrian was seeing the vertical against the horizontal. Ben Nicholson was seeing the circle against the square: the rectangle is man's calculation, the circle is a ball to hold in one's hand. I looked at the circle another way – as the vortex inside which the vital forces were generated – and so, of course, to me the circle moved and became an ellipse. And so it is that the ellipse was the central, the me, of my pictures; some motifs generate within the ellipse, some travel out from it. But just as I became engrossed in these phenomena, the war came – and I packed up my painting things and children and returned to England, there to do war work for the next few years. After that how could I go back to the abstract curve of the ellipse? Had I said anything about it of value?

I changed my vision to the abstract curve of colour. Colour is seen in growing things, living the life of the rainbow curve, the sevenfold spectrum. Flowers create colours out of the light of the sun, refracted by the rainbow prism. So I paint flowers, but they are not botanical or photographic flowers. My paintings talk in colour and any of the shapes are there to express colour but not outline. The flowers are sparks of light, built of and thrown out into the air as rainbows are thrown, in an arc.

I do not attempt to show all the rainbow's colours but the unseen ones are felt and known to be there with their unseen power behind them. Their magic is that they can transform themselves into white light when they choose to coalesce, only to be born again in the yellow of the poppy or a gold daffodil, or in any of the rainbow hues which reside within the circle.

Can you read the rainbow scale?

*Christian Science Monitor, 1975*

## Every Living Thing

Why seek utilitarian motives for living things, flowers, insects, birds? What about enjoyment? Of course there are utilitarian motives, just as there are utilitarian motives in the wish to survive – but when you or

they have survived, what then? Of course the insect is glad to survive, but the enjoyment is in creating – colours, sounds, scents, not for us humans, nor against enemies only, but for themselves, for they are as much artists as we are.

I feel that every living thing, from man to the smallest flea is a creative being. Some create what we can perceive, others create just for the sake of creating – as individuals. And more than that – the even smaller things that we call inanimate, create patterns and beauty, and do this as part of their existence, not as infinitesimal fragments, but as part of the collective individuality of forces like the earth, the sun and the moon – the cosmic universe. Though inanimate, they are part of the whole of life and enjoy the beauty of the order of the great architect.

So what is the use of considering whether poppies are red to warn people not to eat them, when the reason they are red is primarily because, as individual living things they enjoy being red in the harvest field, crimson in the field of vision.

*Christian Science Monitor, 1978*

### Paintings by an Octogenarian

Do you like the pictures of young artists? Most people like them best – the vision of waking eyes, opening out of childhood or out of sleep. The pictures of old eyes have a different aspect to give – eyes that have looked at phenomena till they can see its wrinkles and its furrows as well as a well known, loved face – can see quiet fruitage of experience and the goals long sought and never found – some old artists have given us the harvest of their seeking: Rembrandt, Renoir, Bernard Leach, Michelangelo, Beethoven, the Chinese Masters, and many others. This is different – the light of wisdom, not the fire of enterprising into unknown youth – the fire that to keep alight, burns itself up – Christopher Wood, Keats, Modigliani – and many others. Young genius – meteors that fly on – . But those of us who stay on here – do we grow mossy like Wordsworth? – or have we still a song to sing that you would like to hear?

*Catalogue of exhibition at the LYC gallery, 1979*

## GEORGE MACKAY BROWN

## Lamp

The lamp is needful in Spring, still,  
 Though the jar of daffodils  
 Outsplendours lamplight and hearthflames.

In summer, only near midnight  
 Is match struck to wick.  
 A moth, maybe, troubles the rag of flame.

Harvest. The lamp in the window  
 Summons the scythe-men.  
 A school-book lies on the sill, two yellow halves.

In December the lamp's a jewel,  
 The hearth ingots and incense.  
 A cold star travels across the pane.

## The Long Hall: Winter

The skald tuned his harp. The riff-raff  
 Lounged between the barrel  
 And the hearth (the Earl  
 That winter night

Sat with the bishop, a golden  
 Cup between them, a loaf  
 Tasting of honey, flames  
 Eating the spitted ox).

Harp sang the swallowflight  
 Through the lighted hall,  
 A small troubling  
 Between two dark doors.

Barnmen came in. Fishermen  
 Shifted into the shadows.  
 A kitchen girl carried  
 A plate of bones

To the hungry hound. A keg  
 Was broached. Outside  
 Children went by, singing  
 Of snowflakes and apples.

6/7 September 1984

TOM SCOTT

### From 'The Dirty Business'

You and I again, Eve, have endured  
 the inhuman pain the seed of our innocent love  
 unleash upon the world and on themselves,  
 blaming it all on our alleged transgression.  
 We who have suffered every atrocious spasm:  
 we who have died with every violent death:  
 who suffer the pangs of being born again:  
 we, the immortal spirit of mankind,  
 who rise again from the dead of each new war,  
 must bear again the animal flesh of life  
 and from the smoking ruins build the future.

Flowers grow on the broken wall,  
 grass takes over the rubble mound,  
 bushes sprout on the burnt-out roof,  
 and in the sepulchres of ocean  
 forms of submarine life festoon  
 the sunken ships and aeroplanes:  
 crabs inhabit ribs and skulls,  
 fish throu galley and porthole glide.  
 Life again takes over, Nature  
 herself recycles our destructiveness.

Blind hands learn to read,  
 legs no longer there contrive to stride,  
 The plough furrows the war-wasted soil.  
 New towns rise from the ruins of the old.  
 Enemies fate had destined for one grave  
 find themselves enraptured in one bed.  
 Once again our kind from nightmare awakens.  
 Once again illness is convalescent.  
 Once again we have survived our shame,  
 the obloquy of self-inflicted wounds.

For how long? will tolerant Nature  
 let our kind survive still worse disgrace?  
 Or, in final failure, let her experiment end?  
 Begin again: another evolution?  
 Or has the abyss of wickedness been sounded,  
 the slow climb from the pit at last begun?

Shall we yet see, in centuries to come,  
 that half-forgotten gate we came out from  
 so long ago, welcome the fallen home?

Shall we live to see love triumph over war?

Gaze on the spires of New Jerusalem?

This is the concluding section of a long poem on war (specifically the Second World War) entitled *The Dirty Business*, published by the Luath Press, Barr, Ayrshire.

## RAYNE MACKINNON

## Silence

Showers of stars, moistening a barren land,  
 Hills on the prow  
 That double darkness, and the track afloat  
 Upon the moors; the calling sheep are wells  
 Of sound amid the thirsting silence. Lights,  
 Echoing from the farms high up the dale,  
 Are roosting in the treetops of the dark.  
 The wind tries to round up the sounds of night  
 But lets them all run free: the wayside grass  
 Attempts to coax the tarmac into speech.  
 But all dissolves into a gurgling beck  
 That solves the shadows' staidness, and which talks  
 Of silence resting at the core of things.

Silence. All life's sounds, are swallowed up  
 Into the silent city – drunkards on the spree,  
 A far-off hooter's barren bleat, the rasp  
 Of some stray taxi, making a dent in peace,  
 That slowly heals and carries on its back  
 Stray cats, the sigh of streets, when mankind sleeps  
 And the stars talk. And yet we are afraid  
 Of stillness, butter our souls  
 With rancid, greasy sounds. We jerk our way  
 Down thru the grooves of noises, while a mere sniff  
 Of solitude makes all of us afraid.  
 God wields the scalpel, that lay bares our flesh,  
 The food, the drink, the comfort, the self-love,  
 The self-indulgence, and if mankind wills,  
 He lets a shaft of silence pry within  
 Our hearts – call it what you like, a still  
 Small voice, that drowns the whirlwind and the fire,  
 And like Elijah, we shall know the core,  
 The kernel, nearer than mere noises.

The voice  
 Of poetry dissolves. Rhythms relax.  
 When all is done, stillness can never be  
 Expressed, only explored. Then rest. Pursue  
 Silence's way, and you will find your peace.



## Darkness and Light

I write here in the dormitory's dull peace  
 And hope the fuel of poetry will ignite  
 And I can turn the corner of a mood.  
 The silence sucks out my depression, and I feel  
 A calm come down to roost. The poem's end  
 Lies nestling in the future – I must try  
 Once more to fight with words; my buried art  
 Must toil and strain and resurrect itself  
 High as An Teallach thrusts itself above  
 Each lesser ridge, stooped in humility,  
 And where the tiniest burn stammering along  
 Can slake dark Scotland's thirst.

Outside the walls,  
 Trees in the harbour of the sun, and plump,  
 Contented clouds.  
 The quiet turf feels warmth come pumping thru.  
 Bird-calls are numberless as blades of grass;  
 Swallows forced upward into jerky flight,  
 Make small migrations over youthful woods.  
 The breeze handles the bushes gently; now  
 The cinders of the dreaming city stir  
 In evening's grate. Warm, placid sunlight leans  
 Against the oaks, and no embittered squalls  
 Hurry the twilight into night. Nearby,  
 Brahms stamps his passion on the orchestra,  
 Knocking for entrance, accepting no excuse,  
 Yet thrusting trumpets soften into strings,  
 The slow wakening of wonder at sounds  
 More natural than life and death themselves.  
 Shadows now lean out from the trees, while tense  
 With spring still, eager daffodils spit  
 Their yellow thru the darkness. Passion, calm  
 Are both mine now, and yet somehow I know  
 The stars will soon lift up their heads and sing,  
 The goal of poetry will be attained,  
 Words writhing thru my bitter pen will shape  
 Themselves into a peace, and the last line  
 Will gently fall onto the page the joy.

# Medusa and the Arts

JOHN CAREY

In human forms distinct they stood round Urizen prince of Light  
Petrifying all the Human Imagination into rock & sand. . . .  
Their eyes their ears nostrils & tongues roll outward they behold  
What is within now seen without they are raw to the hungry wind  
They become Nations far remote in a little & dark Land.

WILLIAM BLAKE, *The Four Zoas*

To the symbolic artist, a work's chief value lies in its *significance*, a significance which may be practical (knife, house, law) or transcendental (icon, poem, philosophy). Since the primary function of symbolic art is to point beyond itself, participating in a more comprehensive frame of reference, it is particularly suited to *sacred* purposes.<sup>1</sup> The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (2. 117. 118) sums up much of the symbolic attitude in its statement that 'The picture is not found in colour, background or figure . . . the essence transcends the letter'.<sup>2</sup>

Aesthetic art finds its subjects in the world of appearance, whether expressed in the simple mimesis of realism or the abstracted constituents of form; for the aesthete, moreover, it is the work in itself, and its effect as such upon its audience, which are the primary artistic realities.<sup>3</sup> Such a preoccupation with the phenomenal, in composition and appreciation, is essentially *secular*.<sup>4</sup> An example of aesthetic doctrine is provided by the pioneer theorist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), at the beginning of the third book of his treatise *On Painting*:

The office of the painter is so to draw and paint with lines and colours whatever bodies are given him that, at the right distance, and having centred yourself, whatever you see painted will seem to stand out, and to be most similar to the bodies given.

Symbolic and aesthetic art are rarely found isolated from one another: such an isolation may indeed be neither feasible nor desirable. The Middle Ages, that period in which the sacred art of Europe reached its zenith, was also the time of the ornamental grotesques of choir-stall

and margin, the 'hideous beauty' (*deformis formositas*) of unmeaning shapes which so exasperated Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>5</sup> We may compare in our own century such opposed yet interlocking philosophies as Kandinsky's doctrine of 'the spiritual in art' and the 'plastic mathematics' of Mondrian.

Sacred art was an integral constituent of the ancient religions, and was personified in rich and subtle images: our own culture has inherited the Muses, and the Biblical hypostasis of Holy Wisdom. Secular art, of course, had no such role and was accorded no such symbol. I believe, however, that its premises have at all times been latent in the psyche; and that the lexicon of myth, oldest and most potent of the idioms of articulated thought, contains a symbol in terms of which the aesthetic principle may be fruitfully examined. This symbol is Medusa's severed head, the terrible visage which the Greeks called the *gorgoneion*.

In the discussion which follows I shall at times pass from the consideration of art to that of society, or of experience itself: each alike has been born of imagination, and of the ways in which we see.

\* \* \*

Homer never mentions more of the Gorgon than her head (*Iliad* 5. 741, 8. 349, 11. 36; *Odyssey* 11. 633); and Jane Harrison and others have viewed the Gorgon myth as originating in 'a ritual mask misunderstood'.<sup>6</sup> It is the *gorgoneion* which, despite the various elaborations of her legend, sums up all that is most essential in Medusa's being.

A face without a body, features bereft of the life and mind which their expressions signify – here surely is a fitting symbol for a world of phenomena unsanctified by meaning. Medusa is incomplete, a truth manifest also in the fact that she, alone among the Gorgon sisters, is not immortal (*Hesiod, Theogony* 277). Walter Otto has discussed such fractional being in another context:

The mask is pure confrontation – an antipode, and nothing else. It has no reverse side. . . . It has, in other words, no complete existence either. It is the symbol and the manifestation of that which is simultaneously there and not there: that which is excruciatingly near, that which is completely absent – both in one reality.<sup>7</sup>

From the symbolic standpoint, such a mask can convey only nullity and death; for the aesthete, however, the features themselves are the essential constituents of beauty.<sup>8</sup> It is in antique art that these two approaches first confronted one another, when a sensuous, representational style evolved from the hieratic forms of the Archaic. This shift was reflected in the manner of depicting Medusa:

In archaic art the head was hideous and monstrous, with great teeth and lolling tongue. . . . About the middle of the fifth century B.C. the type was more human, but still had the ugliness. Towards the year 400 B.C. the type became that of a beautiful face.<sup>9</sup>

\* \* \*

Apollodorus records a tradition that Athena killed Medusa because of her beauty (2.4.3). This beauty, in Ovid's version, led Poseidon to rape her in Athena's temple, so that the outraged goddess transformed her into a monster (*Metamorphoses* 4. 790–803). Athena and Poseidon appear as rivals in the tale of their struggle over Athens (Herodotus 8. 55), and it is natural to see them as antithetic, reciprocal deities: Athena a virgin born from her father's brain, presiding over intellectual and civil order; Poseidon the ruler of Nature in its most changeful and arbitrary aspect, lord of the deeps, of tempest and of earthquake. In an unfallen world, their marriage might reconcile the realms of flesh and spirit; but here Athena has isolated herself, and Poseidon violates her sanctuary – an unhallowed union which brings only horror.

Medusa embodies Athena's final repudiation of Poseidon: phenomenal reality, beautiful when sanctified, is demonised by rejection. This rejection, robbing the world of any true bond with the mind, robs it of meaning also. Only the face remains, Nature without life.<sup>10</sup> Medusa becomes the desecrated object, while Athena in her dealings with her is the desecrating subject.

Such radical estrangement appears to be reflected in certain Byzantine amulets, which depict the womb itself as a face with serpent hair: the most intimate, maternal symbol of the cosmos becomes the monstrous vision.<sup>11</sup> Clement of Alexandria noted that the Orphic initiates saw the *gorgoneion* in the disk of the moon (*Stromata* 5. 8), presiding over the world of contingency and tracing the limit of the timeless holiness of heaven; according to Plutarch, it is the moon



The Archaic gorgoneion: terra cotta from Corcyra, c. 600 BC

Plate 2.2, from Josef Floren, *Studien zur Typologie des Gorgoneion*, Münster: Aschendorff, 1977 (*Orbis Antiquus*, Heft 29)

which cheats us of the music of the spheres (*On the Moon's Face* 944A). The idea that the *gorgoneion* governs the mutability of profane existence may also be discerned in the constellation Perseus, where Medusa's head is represented by the flickering binary Algol.

\* \* \*

Apollodorus (2. 4. 2) tells how Perseus was sent to fetch Medusa's head by the wicked king Polydectes, who hoped that he would die in the attempt.

Athena and Hermes led him to the daughters of Phorcys: Enyo, Pephredo and Deino. They were Phorcys' daughters by Ceto, sisters of the Gorgons, grey from their birth. The three had but one eye and one tooth, and exchanged them among themselves by turns. Perseus snatched these, and when they begged for them, said that he would return them if they showed him the road leading to the Nymphs.

In the quest for the *gorgoneion*, it is appropriate that the hero should be guided by Hermes and Athena, deities of cunning and of reason. But who are the daughters of Phorcys? Eratosthenes calls them the guardians of the Gorgons (*Catasterisms* 22), and Aeschylus says that neither sun nor moon shines upon them (*Prometheus Bound* 794–7).

Three beings with a single eye, guarding the road to Medusa – may they not be interpreted as the threefold intellect of traditional psychology, linked to the world by the fragile bridge of sense?<sup>12</sup> The first step in the journey is inward, away from moon and sun; consciousness wrests itself from the phenomena, for the daughters of Phorcys speak only when their eye is hidden.<sup>13</sup> It is the incalculable power gained through abstraction which sets Perseus on his path.

The Nymphs possessed the winged sandals, and the satchel or wallet . . . and they had the helmet of Hades. The daughters of Phorcys told him the way, and he gave them back their eye and tooth and came to the Nymphs. And when he reached them he made haste, and girt himself with the satchel, and fastened on the sandals, and put the helmet on his head – when he had it on, he could see whom he pleased, but could not be seen by others. Then taking the steel sickle of Hermes he came flying to the stream of Ocean, where he found the Gorgons sleeping. . . .



Womb as gorgoneion: Byzantine childbirth amulet, green jasper  
from C. W. King, *The Gnostics and Their Remains*, London 1887

Having obtained the power of abstract thought, Perseus must learn its techniques. Winged and invisible, he is scarcely any longer matter: he has become the scientific ideal, the disembodied observer. He goes on his way armed with an unbreakable, severing blade, and with a receptacle for his spoils – the twofold methodology of analysis and classification. Accoutred with these magic weapons, the hero reaches his unconscious quarry.

When Perseus saw that they were sleeping, he cut off her head: Athena guided his hand while he, looking away and gazing at his bronze shield, beheld the Gorgon's image.

The mask can be seen only in a mirror, and the mirror is a shield. This image is one of the most profound in the myth, and I doubt that any explication can fathom all its mystery. The most evident meaning is simply that Perseus would have been turned to stone had he gazed upon Medusa's face directly. This is Athena's view (and it is she who guides his hand): that the unmediated experience of the external is one of unbearable, annihilating horror.



In more purely epistemological terms the mirror-shield may be seen as the mental construct which intervenes between self and world, translating raw stimuli into conscious images.<sup>14</sup> The mind must dissociate itself not only from externals, but even from this function of its own, if it is to see 'objectively': the mediating faculty, imagination yet the source of sense, is both the shield which shuts out the universe and the mirror which reflects our own interpretations back upon ourselves. We see not the thing, not even our perception of the thing, but rather our idea of that perception – and even this we must hold at arm's length, distinguished from the mathematic point of pure awareness. To be left amid such refractions, such insubstantial surfaces, is to have attained the ultimate refinement of aesthesis.

There is another possibility, to be mentioned perhaps in passing: that, while still alive, Medusa is too beautiful to be safely gazed on. I have mentioned already the tradition that Athena killed her through envy of this beauty; Spenser hints at the same notion in his description of the goddess Nature, veiled perhaps to conceal a bestial visage,

But others tell that it so beauteous was,  
and round about such beames of splendor threw,  
That it the Sunne a thousand times did pass,  
Ne could be seene, but like an image in a glass.  
(*Mutabilitie Cantos* 7. 6. 6–9)

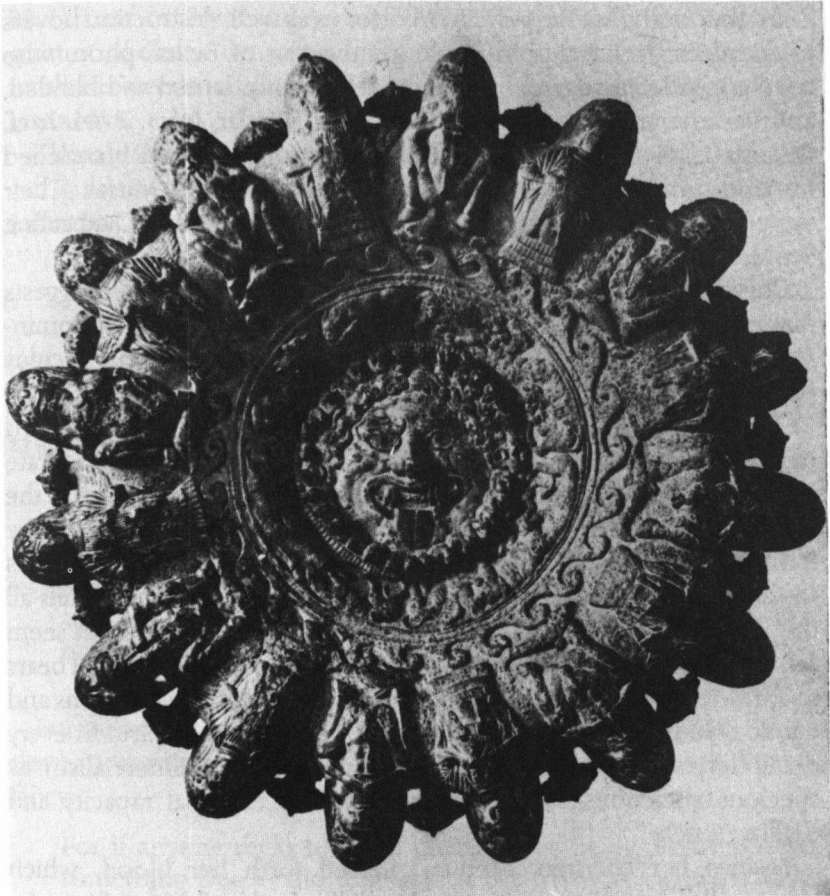
According to the peasants of the Ukraine, the sun is the mirror in which God beholds the world, while we discern therein the reflection of His glory; here the idea attains perhaps its most sublime expression.<sup>15</sup> But we must return to Perseus and his quest.

When her head had been cut off, there sprang forth from the  
Gorgon Pegasus the winged horse, and Chrysaor father of Geryon;  
Poseidon had begotten them upon her.

With her own beheading, Medusa's being is fulfilled: the creature which was really only a face is now a severed head, the monstrous death-in-life has herself been slain. It is at this moment that she bears her children. I feel that these children can be interpreted as the pragmatic results of the triumph of Perseus – those forces which, with the desacralisation of the world, have come to shape society.

Pegasus represents a power of mobility far beyond the natural. The sinister aspects of such power are adumbrated in his duties as bearer of





The gorgoneion as cosmic centre: Etruscan lamp, 5th century BC. The face is ringed by earth (fighting beasts), water (waves and dolphins), air (satyrs and sirens) and fire (sun and stars above their heads)

Plate VII from Hans Leisegang, 'The Mystery of the Serpent', in Joseph Campbell (ed.), *The Mysteries*, NY: Pantheon, 1955 (Bollingen Series XXX.2)

Zeus' thunderbolts (*Theogony* 285–6) – for us as well, destruction hovers in the skies.<sup>16</sup> Nor should we forget the fate of Bellerophon, who sought to ride Pegasus to heaven: he fell and was lamed and blinded, and became an outcast hated by the gods (Pindar, *Isthm.* 7. 44–7; cf. Genesis 11: 4–8). But inspiration as well can come from broadened horizons, and Pegasus is linked sometimes with the Muses. Their sacred spring, the Hippocrene, sprang from his hoofprint; Ovid calls it *fons Medusaeus* (*Metamorphoses* 5. 312).

Chrysaor is an obscurer figure, but his name ('Gold-Sword') suggests that interdependence of economic and military power which dominates our lives. Already in the first century BC., Diodorus Siculus portrayed him as the lord of vast riches and innumerable armies (4. 17. 2). His son Geryon, a monster with three bodies and an enormous herd of oxen, seems an apt emblem for such a society's immoderate opulence; and this symbolism deepens with his transformation at the hands of Dante (*Inferno* 17. 1–18). For the poet Geryon becomes 'the filthy image of fraud', 'the beast with the pointed tail who traverses mountains, who shatters walls and weapons . . . whose stench fills all the world'. His face is that of 'a just man, so benevolent did it seem outside the skin' (*di fuor la pelle*); but his body is a dragon's, and his tail bears a scorpion's deadly sting. His hide is covered with strange patterns and exotic colours, bewitching to the eye but dumb to the spirit. In every detail Geryon foreshadows the degrading effects of commercialism: its specious attractions, its invasive ubiquity, its essential rapacity and defiling touch.

Besides her children, Medusa poured forth her blood, which became deadly venom or potent medicine – that flowing from the veins in the left of her body killed, while that from the right was a remedy for death itself (Apollodorus 3. 10. 3). Here we may recognise perhaps the equivocal gifts of science to our time: the conquest of innumerable diseases and the poisoning of the earth.

Journeying homeward, Perseus' first act was to turn the titan Atlas into stone, petrifying the very axis of the universe (*Metamorphoses* 4. 631–62). He rescued Andromeda by killing a sea-monster, the emissary of Poseidon. He returned to Greece and used the Gorgon's head to destroy his foes; it is then that he gave it to Athena, who set it on her breast as a talisman of terror. In later life he violently resisted the introduction of Dionysus' worship into his domains (Pausanias 2. 20. 4,

22. 1). Lord of Tiryns and Argos, founder of Mycenae and of one of the greatest of Greek dynasties, he became a prototypical 'culture hero', in all his deeds subduing and paralysing the chaotic, the vital and instinctive.

The tale is one of imbalance and sterilisation; the humbled intellect can guide us to holiness, but intellect's tyranny strays toward the inhuman, and at last toward death.<sup>17</sup>

\* \* \*

It is with Medusa's world that a secular, aesthetic art must logically concern itself. Such a world's beauty is in every sense 'skin-deep', as a curious passage in Alberti clearly shows:

... I have been accustomed to say among my friends that the inventor of painting was, in the opinion of the poets, that Narcissus who was turned into a flower. For since painting is the flower of all the arts, the whole story of Narcissus will be perfectly appropriate to the same subject. For what else is painting, but by art to embrace the surface of that pool?

(On Painting, book 2)

But the revery of Narcissus brings impotence, isolation, despair and death. A warning from Plotinus may serve to balance Alberti's flight of fancy:

For if anyone seeks to grasp phenomenal being, desiring it like something true – and it seems to me that somewhere a myth speaks obscurely of such a one, who longed to seize a fair image that hovered on the water, only himself to sink beneath the unseen stream – in just that way a man enthralled by material loveliness, not renouncing it while still in the body, will be plunged in spirit down into abysses dark and joyless to the mind, there to dwell sightless in Hades, and keep company with shadows.<sup>18</sup>

(Enneads 1. 6. 8)

In this context we may understand the gorgoneion's power to transform all who behold it into stone. The petrified victim is identical with the living original in every detail of its exterior – simulacra, Ovid calls the things which once were beasts and men (*Metamorphoses* 4. 780) – but its substance is unliving mineral. Those who see Medusa's face

become themselves mere objects for the eye, deprived of any true function or significance as entities; they are eternal, but in an eternity of death. In the subtle interplay of perceiver and perceived, such vision can murder the world.

There is a static quality in visual mimetic art: Coomaraswamy observes that 'European art naturally depicts a moment of time, an arrested action or an effect of light'.<sup>19</sup> Mimesis reaches its apex in the photograph: and are not Medusa's victims themselves like snapshots, each snared in a single instant?

Toward the end of Ovid's account of the slaying of Medusa, in the brawl at the wedding-feast of Perseus and Andromeda, the hero seizes his cowering rival Phineus. The latter begs for life, and receives the ironic answer, 'I shall give you a monument which will last forever'. Phineus is forced to gaze upon the Gorgon:

Then his neck stiffened even as he strove to turn away his face, and the moisture of his eyes hardened to stone; but his fearful mouth and pleading countenance, his suppliant hands and guilty aspect, remained in marble.

(Metamorphoses 5. 232-5)

The episode perfectly illustrates Stella Kramrisch's assertion that 'Portraiture belongs to civilisations that fear death'.<sup>20</sup> It is as a sense of spiritual reality dwindles that the replication of external detail, the 'immortalisation' of the accidents of individuality, becomes of such importance. Phenomenal art can be a homage to the mystery of being, a search for eternity in the heart of transience. But all too often it is harnessed to the near-sighted anxieties of the ego; and its products, like the frozen, terror-stricken face of Phineus, bear witness only to insufficiency and fear.

\* \* \*

In setting down these thoughts I have moved among mysteries, touching hastily upon matters I scarcely understand. I have tried to show that the *gorgoneion* may help us to think about the aesthetic principle; but if I am correct, if it is indeed the symbol of the anti-symbolic, then the issues which this essay raises are only the first to which the myth can lead us. We have great need of symbols to clarify



The Classical gorgoneion: the 'Medusa Rondanini', Munich.

Plate 1, from Ernst Buschor, *Medusa Rondanini*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1958 (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Abteilung Athen)

our vision: as Agrippa wrote, 'Heavenly things are not touched with the strength of men, and natural things at every instant flee from the inward thought'.<sup>21</sup> The symbol grants us a middle way.

At the frontier between the sins of passion and the deadlier transgressions of the mind, Dante and Virgil find their way blocked by the iron walls of Dis. Jeering fiends defy them from the battlements, and the Furies threaten to bring forth Medusa's head, the sight of which would doom Dante to remain forever in the lower world. At this moment, one of the most dreadful in all the *Inferno*, the poet suddenly addresses his readers:

*O voi che avete gl' intelletti sani,  
Mirate la dottrina che s' asconde  
Sotto il velame degli versi strani.*

'O you whose intellects are whole,  
consider the teaching which is hidden  
under the veil of these strange verses.'  
(*Inferno* 9. 61-3)

To what *dottrina* these famous lines refer has been a matter of conjecture since they were composed, and seems likeliest to remain so. Perhaps Dante found in that terrible face, guarding the ramparts of ruined thought, some of the meaning of which I have written.

### Notes

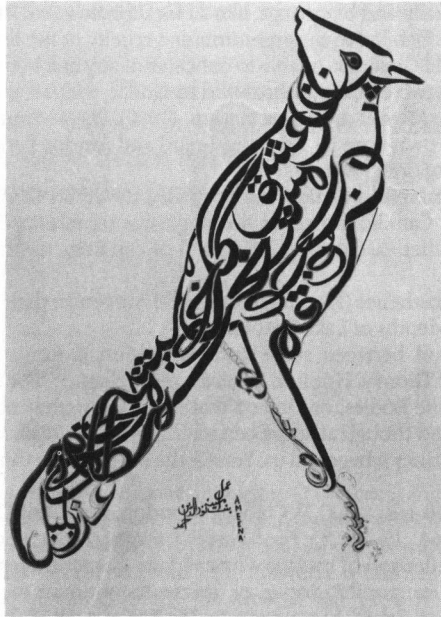
<sup>1</sup> These two sentences perhaps require elaboration. (1) Practical and transcendental are to be understood as distinguished, not opposed; in traditional societies, every practical object has a transcendental value. (2) Although all sacred art must, strictly speaking, partake to some extent of the symbolic, the converse is not necessarily true; this is particularly the case in our own age. Of especial interest in this regard are such movements as Romanticism, symbolist poetry and analytical psychology: here it is psychic processes which are symbolised, but the psyche itself is invested with a status approaching the transcendental.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (1934), 197. I have differed slightly from Coomaraswamy in rendering the Sanskrit.

- <sup>3</sup> In this essay I use the word 'aesthetic' as the most convenient antonym for 'symbolic'; it is to be understood simply as the adjective derived from Greek *aisthēsis*, 'sensory perception'.
- <sup>4</sup> It should be added that aesthetic art may be applied to spiritual purposes *negatively*, suggesting the Unknowable by exploring the limitations of experience. Much of the writing of Walter de la Mare is to be understood in this light, as are traditional haiku. A fuller consideration of such 'privative art' would be very fruitful, but would lead beyond the boundaries of this essay.
- <sup>5</sup> *Apology to Abbot William* 12. 29, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 3, *Tractatus et opuscula*, eds. J. Leclercq and H. M. Rochais (1963), 106.
- <sup>6</sup> *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1908), 187.
- <sup>7</sup> *Dionysus: Myth and Cult*, trans. Robert B. Palmer (1965), 91.
- <sup>8</sup> It is interesting to find just such an aesthetic assessment of the gorgoneion in Kimon Friar's article 'The Stone Eyes of Medusa', *Greek Heritage* 6. 33–4: 'Medusa represents perfection in its absolute form, pattern devoid of subject. She is that final reach of form of which Walter Pater wrote. . . . She is art for art's sake, the pursuit of perfection, and in her finality she is Death.' The idea is the same as that which guides this study, but the values are antithetical.
- <sup>9</sup> Sir William Smith, *A Classical Dictionary*, revised by G. E. Marindin (1909), 369.
- <sup>10</sup> The draining of all life from Nature found perhaps its most drastic expression in the teachings of the Cartesian school. Descartes wrote to an acquaintance that 'the beasts . . . function naturally and by springs, like a clock' (*Oeuvres*, ed. Victor Cousin, 1825, 9. 426): a doctrine which led to the absentminded cruelty of the Port Royal vivisections. His disciple Arnold Geulincx, unable to conceive of any link between body and mind, imagined them as two clocks synchronised by God.
- <sup>11</sup> Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* (1950), 90–1. Similar ideas have been expressed in our own time by Sigmund Freud and Sandor Ferenczi (cited by Hazel Barnes, *The Meddling Gods*, 1974, 10–11).
- <sup>12</sup> An almost identical interpretation was proposed by Giulio Camillo in *L'idea del teatro* (1550), 56–62; for Camillo, however, the single eye represents divine illumination (*il raggio divino*). In either case the ego, in search of certainty, turns away from what lies beyond itself.
- <sup>13</sup> According to Eratosthenes (*loc. cit.*), Perseus did not return their eye to the sisters, but hurled it into the depths of Lake Tritonis.
- <sup>14</sup> This idea of a gulf between sense and perception is fundamental to mechanist psychology. Thus Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, pt. 1, chap. 1: 'For if those Colours, and Sounds, were in the Bōdies, or Objects that cause them, they could not be severed from them. . . . And though at some certain distance, the reall, and very object seem invested with the fancy it begets in us; Yet still the object is one thing, the image or fancy is another.'
- <sup>15</sup> *Siberian and Other Folk-tales*, ed. C. F. Coxwell (London, n.d.), 989. Cf. Blake, *The Four Zoas*, Night the Fifth, 64. 19–20: 'O Fool could I forget the light that filled my bright spheres / Was a reflection of his face who calld me from the deep.'
- <sup>16</sup> The threat of nuclear annihilation is, of course, the ultimate expression of Medusa's power. As Jonathan Schell has written in *The Fate of the Earth* (1982), 156: 'Rampant reason, man found, was, if anything, more to be feared than rampant instinct. Bestiality had been the cause of many horrors, but it had never threatened the species with extinction; some instinct for self-preservation was still at work. Only 'selfless' reason could ever entertain the thought of self-extinction.'



- <sup>17</sup> In the words of Frithjof Schuon: 'One should not lose sight of the fact that 'idealism' is not bad in itself, inasmuch as it finds its place in the mind of the hero, always inclined towards 'sublimation'; what is bad, and at the same time specifically Western, is the intrusion of this mentality into every sphere, including those to which it should remain a stranger.' (In 'Concerning Form in Art', *Art and Thought*, ed. K. B. Iyer, 1947, 8.)
- <sup>18</sup> Compare George Herbert: 'In shallow waters heav'n doth show; / But who drinks on, to hell may go' (*The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides, 1974, 111).
- <sup>19</sup> Op. cit. 30–1.
- <sup>20</sup> Quoted from *Indian Sculpture* by Coomaraswamy, op. cit. 204.
- <sup>21</sup> Cornelius Agrippa, *On the Vanity and Uncertainty of Arts and Sciences*, trans. James Sanford (1569), chap. 100.



*The Nightingale's Excuse*

I am so lost in my love for the rose  
I am not aware even of myself



## NEIL CURRY

## Lindisfarne

All afternoon a cold east wind  
 Had parched the sand to a smooth, scraped vellum  
 That the cursive run of the tide  
 Would scrawl across, stipple and etch.  
 Later, when it had all but  
 Covered Cuddy's Rock the dark cormorants  
 Hung out their wings to dry.

From his scriptorium window  
 Eadfrith had sketched their great beaks and pebbled  
 Luxury of that beach. Now though,  
 There was Jerome's Prolegomena  
 To be penned. 'Novum opus  
 Facere me cogis ex veteri . . .'  
 New work out of the old.

For such tasks, tired dexterities  
 Are never enough; echoes of echoes.  
 What's called for is that other gift  
 Which subverts logic with all the  
 Nonchalance of nuance: a man  
 Conscious of the silence flooding his mind  
 And giving shape to it.

Whirlpools of ribboned interlace  
 He drew, maelstroms of colour: indigo,  
 Verdigris, orpiment and woad;  
 Labyrinths and carpets of praise,  
 Of spirals, eyed-pelta and plait.  
 Craftsman, peacock and saint, Eadfrith's  
 Quills fluttered with the Word.

## Gardens

We smiled together  
 over the precepts in that old herbal,  
 vowing, as we valued our eyesight,  
     never to gather  
     the fruit of the peony  
     save at dead of night  
 and thus 'all unseene of the woodpecker',

noted too that powdered  
 periwinkle and earthworm, if taken  
 at mealtimes, does rekindle a wife's  
     love for her husband;  
     strange that they would tolerate  
     such wild beliefs  
 in days when heretics, not weeds, got burned.

But what gardeners they were:  
 what arbours of trellis work; embroidered  
 intricacies of bright nosegay-knots;  
     thrift and lavender –  
     scented walks of evergreen;  
     what salves and syrups  
 of simple herbs for health and provender;

what workers for Eden.  
 Though few of us today would freely voice  
 our dreams of unicorns and rosebuds,  
     their secret garden  
     has alleyways that may yet  
     outpace all our thoughts.  
 What our lives lack is what our hands fashion.

The Moghul emperor  
 Babur, blazed and butchered his way across  
 the steppes of Asia, then called a halt  
     while his warriors  
     erected walls around one  
     cool sequestered spot  
 where lilacs shaded white shawls of water.

## ANDREW STANILAND

Who dares ascend the hidden pinnacle  
 Of poetry, to disappear in clouds  
 And re-emerge in brightness, to look down  
 On fields of white, to sing the miracle  
 Of life, sun-gilded clarity of light,  
 The sapphire sky, the soft green land below,  
 Ascent, descent, the way the heart can grow  
 To know the depth by knowledge of the height?

Who dares explore what lurks and shifts and seems,  
 The inner truths intangible as air,  
 As real – as atoms abstract as a chair –  
 The teachings, transformations of a dream?  
 The strangeness of a rainbow to the blind  
 Is blitheness to the cool deep psychic well  
 Of gods and ghosts, infinity and hell.  
 Who knows the limits of another mind?

## Divining

Translucent mind, the quick clear stream of thought  
 Spills shortlived, dripping jewels as it pours  
 From spring to source.  
 The thin stem trembles, bends:  
 Whatever you intend  
 Breathes out, your timbre, choice and chance of words,  
 Breathes in, turns image in me, ripples send  
 The echoes of an unknown world  
 Against the sudden shore.  
 The island of a moment, thick with ferns,  
 Impenetrable, sanctuary, shields  
 A flock of threatened birds, that startled, skim  
 Their shadow script across the fields  
 Imaginings have ploughed.  
 A whirlpool catches wishes, sucks them down  
 Without a sound,  
 Perception is washed clean  
 By fresh perception, taking root within  
 As threefold, given, pale white lilies swim.

# Some Concepts of the Sacred and the Secular

E. W. F. TOMLIN

It will be agreed that secularism is a manifest feature of the modern world. In the West, it began with the Reformation: it was greatly accelerated by the scientific revolution of the 17th century: but it was not until the 19th century that the word secularism itself entered into general circulation. We are still in the throes of the scientific revolution, and for some the 'progress of science' means the process of secularization. Indeed, there are those who believe that secularization can, on that account, never be halted; and there have been books written even by theologians, such as Harvey Cox, author of *The Secular City* (1965), which introduce a sharp distinction between *secularism* and *secularization*, and which argue that *secularization* is a salutary process and should be allowed to proceed unhindered.

The result is that in the West there has long been a break or fissure between the sacred and the secular, whereas in the Orient prior to the Westernizing impact no such radical separation existed. Even today, despite increasing Western influence, many oriental cultures preserve a unified view of existence in which the progressive or conscious delimitation of the sacred has hardly yet begun. This is no doubt because the major oriental faiths preach either that all is inherently sacred (as with Shinto and other animistic cults), or that what in the West is termed the *secular* is nothing but *Maya* or illusion. The secular therefore exists, but only as *phenomena*.

There is a case for saying that the *sacred* is the norm, and that the *secular* or the *profane*, at least as a total world-view or *Weltanschauung*, is a deviation from this norm. I shall argue this case here. My approach will be phenomenological: that is to say, I propose to describe matters of common experience. The truth of particular doctrines is not my concern, though I naturally believe that it must ultimately be faced.

What is the *sacred*?

It is a total view of the world, holding that life in all its forms is the product of meaningful forces. These forces have traditionally been

called divine: that is to say, emanating from a higher source of meaning. Thus the sacred and the *transcendent* would seem to imply each other.

Such divine forces, then, lend significance to all natural processes and are the *secret* of them. Man, as part of nature, is the *meaningful* creature; for the word 'man' is cognate with the root *manas* (mens) or 'mind'. Man is the creature who can mean, and therefore the creature who can 'confer' meaning or symbolize.

The *sacred* and the *secret* are therefore traditionally linked.

Just as the word *profane* means literally that which is 'outside the temple' (*pro fanum*), so the word *secret* means that which is 'put apart' (from *cernere*), i.e., that which is *inside* the sacred precincts, or, in another context, that which is in the sacred precincts of human personality. Thus to *consecrate* a person or a building is deliberately and publicly to put that person or building 'apart', to specify his or its use for certain purposes and under certain carefully prescribed conditions. At the heart of the sacred are secret or esoteric – that is, internal – rites, initiation ceremonies (i.e., ceremonies of 'bringing in' or admission), or mysteries, in the original Greek sense: for the term *musterion* was used to describe not merely such practices as took place at Eleusis but later the Christian ceremonies of initiation, above all that of the Eucharist.

All cultures, using that term in the current anthropological sense, have such rites, cults or mysteries. Even in nominally or supposedly secular cultures, such rites, cults and mysteries are still to be found, sometimes heavily disguised, sometimes quite openly and on a vast scale. This implies that no society or culture is wholly secular, or rather wholly secularized. Indeed, it serves to confirm the fact that total secularization would mean cultural atrophy or disintegration. A culture has at its core a cult; and since everything perishes from within, the neglect or abolition of the cult would herald the passing of a cultural epoch.

By contrast, the word *secular*, coming from the Latin 'age' or rather 'this age', implies a unit of time. Therefore, secularization as a process (and a process it is), has something to do with *time* or *temporality*. This may be the clue to the understanding of the two antithetical processes, *sacralization* and *secularization*.

The development of modern technology has encouraged the

notion that only *linear history* enjoys reality. That is to say, there is only one conception of the real, the single unified spatio-temporal system of mathematico-physical science. Within this framework, all events take place and proceed in succession. Time is *partes extra partes*, the units having no inner relationship one to another. This means that in the official scientific *Weltanschauung*, there is no place for the sacred. The sacred belongs in a sense to the extra-temporal. Even so, a vague notion of the sacred continues to survive in the mechanistic world-view; and it does so under two guises: in a detached aestheticism on the one hand, evolving patterns which are supposed to possess meaning or significance in themselves, and in a semi-mystical 'pursuit of science' on the other. The Promised Land is the land which science will one day bring into existence. Science promises it – this is the dynamism behind the philosophy of Auguste Comte and of Karl Marx. The Promised Land is the true humanity or the classless society. In short, Paradise is at the end of the linear time-series, instead of being above or beyond the time-series. Eschatology, the doctrine of the Last Judgment and its aftermath, is thus secularized: the 'millennium' is the end-process of so many secular units or *saecula* placed one after another, or stretched end to end. These units, like millennium itself, stand not for literal measurements but for symbolic ones, as with the days of creation in the *Book of Genesis*.

In the secular ideology, Paradise is still a place or condition wholly removed and inaccessible; but its inaccessibility is due merely to its being *beyond our time*, which is meanwhile deprived of sacredness. We are left only with the *temporary*; and it is interesting to observe that almost all secular eschatologies introduce an *interregnum*, a necessary period of probation. In Marxism, it is the so-called 'dictation of the proletariat': a period of unspecified duration dividing the era of capitalist exploitation from that of the abolition of the state and the emergence of the classless society. Since this period of probation is both profane and unredeemed, though providing opportunity of amendment in select cases, humanity has still to come into existence: whereas with the traditional notion of the sacred, humanity exists in so far as it realizes, at any or at every moment, its sacred or divine origin. But since the process of secularization is never complete or total, a sacralizing element persists; and humanity, though so to speak

'outside itself', deifies its own image and erects its own cult of Humanism. Humanistic cults are thus found to arise at periods of accelerated or galloping secularization. This would account for the semi-secular Humanism of the Renaissance, the more defiant Humanism of the period prior to and during the French Revolution, and the Humanism of our Atomic Age, both that of the apostles of science and that of the demythologizing theologians, who, in order to salvage their beliefs, seek to establish a concordat with science. This is usually a science or a scientific ideology with which the more able among the scientists have begun to be dissatisfied. At the heart of every such Humanism, paradoxical as it may seem, there lurks a profound pessimism. 'Belief in man' contains a rhetorical, histrionic aspect, and as such is artificial, contrived, and therefore infused with doubt. Hence it is quite logical that the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, for whom man is 'une passion inutile', should describe itself as a Humanism. It is a Humanism, indeed, which represents man as alone in the universe, and therefore as an absurdity. The universe in which man is alone is, in the scientific *Weltanschauung*, a universe of material 'things' subject to statistical laws, a universe of randomness and accident. Such laws are in themselves stupid; and the absurdity of existentialist experience is therefore the correlative of the stupidity of the laws of classical physics. By contrast, the traditional idea of the sacred is that which represents man as at one ('holy') with transcendent forces, from which he derives his meaning. That indeed is the root meaning of re-ligion, the establishment of a divine-human link or covenant. On the orthodox view, man comes into existence, not at the end of a linear temporal process, but as a result of being in permanent tension with forces greater than himself. Man is the sacred creature, and therefore committed to the perpetual struggle to transcend his animality. He has in fact two disciplines of which the animals remain ignorant: religion and education. And although in the secular society an attempt is made to dispense with the first, the task soon proves hopeless. Religion re-emerges in the guise of various political ideologies, often with rituals similar in character to those of the traditional faiths. Thus, Auguste Comte, the apostle of Positivism, ended up by preaching a grandiose Religion of Humanity, for which he envisaged temples, services, and even an ordained episcopacy.

Meanwhile, excessive hopes are placed upon education. Governments spend immense sums on systems of instruction at the secular level which shall do duty for the sacred education of the past. In the secular society man is a *slave to the future*, whereas the sacred binds him to a 'holy' past which, in liturgy and ritual, is symbolized as eternally present.

There are two aspects of the sacred, or sacralization process, which are of fundamental importance, but about which there has been much controversy and some confusion. These are the symbolic and the magical. All cults, from those of the primitive agricultural societies to those of our modern urban civilizations, have made use of *sacred space*: that is to say, special places or areas – mountains or high places, groves, or man-made shrines and temples – where the sacred rites are performed, and of which special groups of people – priests or priestesses, anchorites, catechumens or their equivalent: that is, reserved and consecrated officials – are the custodians. Even within this hallowed space, there are parts more sacred than others. To one of these – the inner sanctum or Holy of Holies – only the chief priest, and he only at certain times and following special ceremonies of purification, is allowed access. For example, at the Izumo Shrine on the Japan Sea coast of the main island of Honshu, there is a section of the inner sanctum to which the chief priest may enter only once every sixty or so years. In the Higher Religions, the design of temples and churches is so graduated and disposed as to reflect this series of degrees of holiness. The narthex of a Byzantine church was less sacred than the nave, the nave than the chancel, the chancel than the altar within it. For the design was intended to symbolize the stages of life itself.

In all religious cults, likewise, there are periods of *sacred time*: that is to say, the religious seasons which demand special ceremonies and festivals, and which, taken in succession, make up the liturgical year. Liturgy, the organization of the year into sacred or hallowed seasons, symbolizes the beginning of the incorporation of time into the sacred order. As an adjunct to these ceremonies and festivals, there are special vestments, special music, special light and special darkness, special ways of speaking, special ways of keeping silent, even special ways of looking (e.g., the grave, the solemn); and, in the case of the



seasons, special ways of behaving, as for instance in the abstinence prescribed during the Moslem Ramadan (until sunset) and during the Christian Lent. All major religions likewise confer a special sacred or sacramental character on crucial events in the life of individuals: birth, puberty, marriage and death – in short, the chief crises of the human life-cycle. Although such moments are at root biological, or because they are, they have powerful psychic or emotional counterparts, not only for the individual concerned but also for his fellows. Taken as ritual, the services of baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial (to cite examples from Christianity alone) are intended to induce a new emotional attitude in all concerned. The Catholic First Communion used to form a striking example of this social recognition, even in secular France. A funeral is a special way of taking leave of a person, just as baptism and confirmation are special ways of receiving a person: the first has left humanity and the second has joined it – joined not the human race, because that was accomplished at biological birth, but the sacred humanity or, to church people, the community of the faithful. The word ‘sacrament’ is, in fact, derived from the Roman oath taken by a new recruit to the army – the fellowship of fighting men or defenders of the Roman State. With the Christianization of the Roman Empire, the term was taken over by what was appropriately called the Church Militant.

The allocation of sacred space and sacred time is a deliberate symbolic act or *fiat*. It begins usually with special acts of consecration or dedication, and demands periodical re-dedication or renewal. Just as the shape of a Christian church symbolizes the Cross, so the allocation of space of varying degrees of sacredness is an exercise in symbolization too. The structure, and also its special equipment, represent, so to speak, *theophanies* or at least *epiphanies* – means whereby the divine powers, or their outward signs, are made to ‘show through’. They are also means whereby the worshipper is enabled to make the appropriate emotional response. This enlisting and mobilization of response is the function of all ritual, without which it is pointless and even ludicrous. Some confusion has perhaps been caused by the putting into circulation by Rudolf Otto in his famous book *Das Heilige* (1908) of the idea of a numinous power or sense: a power or sense which gives rise to an irrational feeling with which he

associates true religion. This might be taken – though Otto tried to defend himself against the notion – to imply the existence of a particular psychic force which inhabited the sacred edifice or sacred places; and this would seem to lead to the very ‘materialization’ of religion which he was at pains to repudiate. All sacred space and time are symbolic and designated by a symbolic or – in John Austin’s term – performative act or utterance. The priest ‘pronounces’ the couple man and wife; a person of a certain importance ‘declares’ a meeting open – even the secularists demand some such ceremonial formula, thereby paying homage to the sacredness they otherwise deny. What is symbolized, in the ultimate sense, will be examined in a moment.

The history of the sacred is bound up with the history of magic. The decadence of magic – magic as we so often tend to regard it today – accompanies and signalizes a degeneration of the sacred.

We habitually regard magic as the opposite, if not the travesty, of science. Magic in this sense means the activity of sorcerers, necromancers, and shamans, and of those who believe, for example, that by sticking pins into the effigy of one’s enemy one may do him an injury. A whole school of anthropology, led by Sir James Frazer, whose *Golden Bough* was published in its entirety in 1915, has argued that in the pre-scientific era this view was literally accepted. According to Frazer, primitive man believed in the direct efficacy of his magical rites or spells, whether on the processes of nature or on the conduct of men; and this was all he meant or intended by such practices.

Although such beliefs in direct efficacy persisted and still persist – burning an effigy of unpopular politicians still retains a superstitious element – they represent nothing but the degeneration of magic. The reason for the literal acceptance of such a view, even by men of perspicacity and learning, is no doubt because most primitive societies encountered by modern investigators have been in a state of decadence: a state which their contact with modern Western civilization has done nothing to ameliorate. Ritualistic magic in the true sense is, as Collingwood pointed out in his brilliant but neglected book, *The Principles of Art* (1938), a special and permanent means for the generation of emotion; and it is intimately bound up with the sacralizing process.

There are two ways in which emotion or psychic energy can be

generated. One is for the purpose of 'ploughing it back' into everyday life. The other is for the purpose of discharging it in the act itself. The first is concerned with stimulating morale, to put people in a condition for more effective action. The war dances of primitive tribes, like the enormous parades of totalitarian governments, are magical rites for the raising of public morale. The enemy was not defeated by the dance, but he was no doubt more effectively combated as a result of its performance. Ritual and ceremony, being the forms whereby such magical activity is generated, exert a therapeutic effect on the worshippers or warriors and not least on the spectators themselves. They are forms not of brain-washing but of heart-washing; they are action-cordials. The *Sursum Corda* in the Catholic or Anglican Mass is an overt expression of this 'uplift', a means to the purification of emotion. When religion degenerates into superstition – an inherent tendency in all religion – this purification of emotion degenerates into magic as we know it. Therapy turns into threat. In the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, there is a passage describing how a sorcerer, bent upon obtaining some favour from the gods, threatens to betray their names to the demons, and to tear out their hair 'as lotus blossoms are pulled from a pond'. This is magical degeneration, like the laying of curses and to some extent the pronouncing of anathemas.

Such sub-magical emotions are emotions which expend themselves on their immediate object and in the act itself. 'The flame of anger', says the *Sutralankara Shastra*, quoted in the Noh play *Aoi no Uye*, 'consumes itself only'. It is not for nothing that our amusement industry specializes in the 'sensational'; for sensation-for-sensation's-sake is the be-all-and-end-all of amusement. In other words, amusement is the emotional counterpart of the secular, which, with its linear view of time, demands that the emotions shall be aroused and discharged in each time-unit. Hence amusement satisfies and exhausts simultaneously, and therefore only partially satisfies. Significantly enough, the amusement industry, now enormously expanded through television, with its apparently endless succession of 'comedy shows', has grown up and thriven with creeping secularization. And as this process, being a function of linear time, is also the generator of boredom, amusement is needed in larger and larger doses to cope with the increasing pressure of *ennui*. Thus an amusement cult is liable to encourage, as

one of its by-products, a cult of violence. Violence in the sphere of sport or play has puzzled sociologists and government officials, who ignore the fact that play, being now almost wholly secularized, no longer affords the psychic satisfaction it once did. In the same way, the increasing rowdiness among holiday-makers, especially when abroad and in a permissive environment, may be attributed to the fact that holidays, in contrast to the holy days of another era, are for the most part secularized. Amusement is laid on as a kind of collective therapy, if occasionally interrupted by some obligatory or grudging sightseeing of a partially desacralized past: which, far from curing boredom, ends by increasing it and provoking the unruly passions which amusement was designed to 'earth'.

To return to the distinction of which Harvey Cox, in *The Secular City*, makes great play, namely the distinction between secularization and secularism. Secularization may within limits be an inevitable process, but secularism, namely a new ideology replacing and driving out the sacred, is dangerous as forming an ideology without roots. The diatribes against mechanization which began with the Luddites in England and which inspired the rhetoric of Carlyle, Ruskin and William Morris, were directed – or should have been directed – not against mechanization as a technical process, but against mechanism as a philosophy or metaphysic.

Secularism is indeed a condition in which the link between the world of space-time and the world of value is ruptured. As a consequence of that rupture, the traditional sacred rituals are deprived of point. Two examples will suffice. One of the most interesting, if disturbing, features of the contemporary profane – that is, non-sacral – world is the secularization of alcohol. The sacred drink, whether the Hindu *soma*, the Japanese *sake*, or the product of the vine, has always been a necessary adjunct to religious ceremony. Public functions, from weddings to banquets, still demand the ceremonial libation: indeed, even the private dinner-party, which retains vestiges of the sacred meal or love-feast, and which is in essence magical in intent (being designed to generate creative emotions and to send away the guests well-pleased with each other and with themselves), entails the use of alcohol for this purpose. But there is now a whole field of the secular world, both free and totalitarian, where alcohol is

employed in vast quantities with no object other than its consumption as an end in itself. Intoxication for intoxication's sake is the aim. It thereby fulfils the function of pure amusement which we have associated with the secular. The 'hangover' is a secular experience – indeed, a time-concept, appropriately called 'the morning after', though one must admit that such experiences must also have characterized the cult of Dionysus; but I suppose that a sacred hangover is excusable. A similar rupture has occurred in the sphere of sex. Here, again, the amusement industry has harnessed sex to a point where it has almost ceased to have any link with its primal purposes, and therefore it has been totally desacralized. In this sense, the erotic cult of our day is seen not as a great blow for freedom of expression, but as a reflection of psychic and spiritual inanition.

The secularization of death has received a certain amount of attention of recent years, especially in sociological studies and in novels, beginning with *The Loved One* of Evelyn Waugh. A subject less dwelt upon, though falling within the scope of an essay of this kind, is that of dreams. The secularization of dreams, or rather their interpretation in purely material, reductivist terms, is not the least among the deleterious consequences of much modern psychological theory. T. S. Eliot made a profound point when, in his essay on Dante (1929), he observed, of the mediaeval habit of seeing visions, that 'we have nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions – a practice now relegated to the aberrant and the uneducated – was once a more significant, interesting and disciplined kind of dreaming. We take it for granted that our dreams spring from below: possibly the quality of our dreams suffers in consequence'.

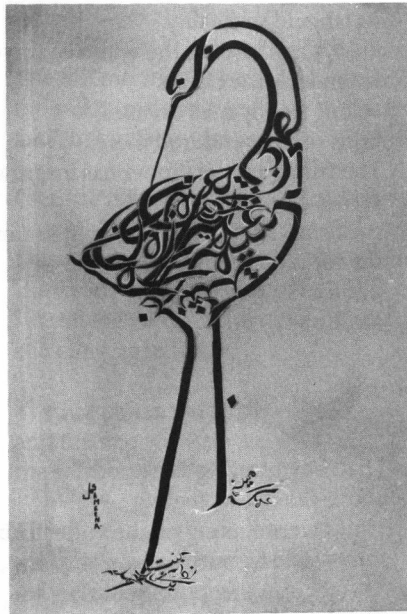
Given that a certain amount of psychic energy is expended during sleep, perhaps more than we think, and yet that such activity is often dismissed as purposeless, it would follow that great tracts of human life must be irremediably ill-spent. For even the psychologists who believe that dreaming is an activity in which psychic problems are worked out in a manner denied to the conscious mind, make as a rule no connection between this activity and 'visionary' experience. The content of the unconscious realm is assumed to be dark, inchoate, the steamy with unsavoury impulses and unsocial desires. In short, the unconscious is a psychic cloaca. You can hardly reduce the mind

lower than the Freudians have done. And Eliot was surely right to suggest that if our dreams are viewed in the light or darkness of such an assumption, we are likely to supply the analyst with more material of the same kind. For we tend to dream to order; and for some, the orders of the psychiatrist or the psychoanalyst are paramount. Yet this subliminal world, as sometimes C. G. Jung would appear to hint, could be the source as much of beauty and ecstasy as of ugliness and dejection. In the past, indeed, this may have been the common experience. Given the general banality of existence, mankind cannot be imagined as enduring life without some source, however intermittent, of exaltation. The private world of dreams may have provided such a source: whereas the resort of modern man is so often day-dreaming. If the sense of the sacred could once more be restored to the vital activity of sleep – and the world of dreams to which it gives access – modern man might be a great deal happier. And a happier mankind would be a better mankind: there seems little doubt about that, unless happiness be defined in the most crudely hedonistic terms. As it is, our culture is a great deal too *voulu*, and so is our amusement for that matter; for the secular is always destined to become increasingly strident. One characteristic of the sacred throughout the ages is that in art and ceremony it has always known how to mobilize the unspoken.

All true culture, then, needs the practice and pursuit of the magical arts, dedicated to the upholding and stimulating of communal morale; and the decadence of culture is heralded by the prolapsus of magical art into amusement art. The totalitarian manifestations referred to can easily become the rampaging mobs who discharge their psychic energy in destruction and insult. For the secular world is at bottom ruthless. It contains no sanctuary, no reserved space, no reserved time (which is always holy, e.g., 'the truce of God'), and no reserved individuals. All is at the mercy of linear time. This happened notoriously with ancient Rome, when the decorous and pious religion of hearth and home gave place to, or was overshadowed by, the callous amusement art of the Hippodrome and the Colosseum, supervised by such artists as Nero ('What an artist dies here!', he is said to have cried before his violent end. What indeed!) Insight and enlightenment degenerated into 'spectacle', the sacred into the secu-

lar, and a new Rome arose only with the upsurge of the sacred from the depths – in short, from the Catacombs.

Although it may appear to contradict the point made at the beginning concerning the sacred as the norm and the secular as the deviation from that norm, there is no denying that the birth of Judaeo-Christianity introduced a new view of the secular whereby time itself was invested with a particular sacredness, or at least offered the possibility of sacralization. It was therefore real and not, as in most other oriental faiths, illusory. But this was because time or history had begun again with the Incarnation. The sacred entered into time. As St. Paul was the first to grasp, this involved a new view both of the sacred and of history. Thereafter, history, which began and will end with man, becomes the story of his repeated efforts to salvage his humanity, the story of his successive attempts to redeem the secular.



*The Heron's Excuse*

My love is entirely for the sea  
The simurgh's vision cannot comfort me



## JOHN ALLISON

## Seals at Kaikoura

## One

Suddenly the heaving sea was sealed  
as eighty kilos of benign  
strength, warmth, sated appetite  
slid from the rock.  
I wonder, how must the water feel  
when entered so?

Such clumsy flesh on shore  
the seal in water has become pure form  
exultant in its element.  
Its languid sensuality  
enjoys and justifies the whim of waves  
as tenderly the ocean,  
rolling slowly over on itself  
finds seal engendered there.  
The falling arc the flipper has inscribed  
across the spray  
confirms that moment when it seems  
the sea is there  
just for the seal, the seal  
for the sea.

## Two

I had been singing as I stood  
above the ocean, feeling  
wings were waiting on the wide horizon  
for a world to be articulate.

The thought of being overheard  
had snared my hearing,  
and I saw that on the edges of the sea  
the seals were listening.



I ceased then, sensing  
inwardness that dreamed beyond my reach.

The seals were listening  
to that more ancient lullaby  
entwined like kelp  
around another intimate yet distant shore.

I have become quite silent  
for my singing can't enhance their stillness.

But at night I hear  
that song, I hear it in the tide  
that surges in my heart,  
but dare not ever let myself be heard.

### Three

The full moon calls across the sea,  
the selkie-maiden rises from the waves  
and slips into my dreams.

I see the misty gaze of eyes through which  
near and distant stars have passed,  
I hear the weird intoning of those melodies  
from long before my birth,  
I smell the wild salt fragrance of sea flowers  
still clinging to the fur.

The full moon rises, falls,  
and turning with the turning tide  
the selkie calls. I follow, down . . .

The ocean closes over me,  
the ocean flows through me,  
the ocean opens out in me.

Unsealed into the sea  
I am the seal,  
I am the sea.

## Australia

Out there, gum-leaf, ibis-beak,  
 each arcs towards the grass  
 as a heron's flight arches to the river;  
 all in downward motion  
 manifest the same prophetic gesture, this  
 descending from expansive spaces,  
 from the widest sky on earth  
 towards this ancient red and ochre clay.

So much is expressed within a single line:  
 creation's curve,  
 God's hand in benediction  
 touching  
 this hard-edged starkly-etched land,  
 a thought  
 that moves just like a darting spider . . .

There, where vertices of spirit and matter  
 intersect, the world is ensouled –  
 with pinks, blues, magenta, violet –  
 with hues that hover in between the hills,  
 among the loose-limbed trees,  
 within the luscious velvet of the shadows  
 where leaves exhale their essence  
 in the aromatic dusk.

In here, the spider weaves its web  
 across the poles of all  
 my inherent tensions, spinning  
 threads of intricate, attenuated thinking,  
 casting spells which only find release  
 through the harsh guffawing  
 of kookaburras in the gums,  
 or the raucous camaradie of the cockatoos  
 and magpies, squabbling  
 children of the heart's contradictions.

Out there, in here I am a wanderer,  
 and wondering when  
 the touch of blessing will descend again,  
 resolving all that's disjunct  
 in the manifold dimensions of this land  
 I have so suddenly become.

## The Cat

A ratchet-wheel of sparrows  
turns in winter trees, and leaves  
fly off like sparks. The cat  
sits very still, seeing other things.

Things that slip between  
the sharp delineation of our senses  
are the cat's obsession. Like  
the shapes the spindle of the wind

has spun across the grass.  
Like movement etched upon the light,  
a fleeting interruption  
which could be, perhaps, a blink

except the cat knows  
otherwise. Or like a sudden hole  
appearing in the stillness  
of this waiting world at dusk.

It is night. The cat  
sits very still, her liquid tail-tip  
flicking. Hidden life  
awakens, widening in her eyes.

## Dolphins

Conjunct in movement's bliss, the two  
dolphins double-stitch the edges of the bay,  
deftly threading the water  
just beyond the surf's tattered weft  
that catches, fraying on the rocks.

At night, as I dream along the beach,  
seeing the silken sheen upon the cloth  
the dolphins had embroidered,  
still the floss of thought remains, drawn  
taut across the image in my brain.

## Among Totaras

The silence of these trees  
is so much larger  
than the noise my heart makes.  
I shrink into the vastness  
that's become my ear,  
listening to the sounds  
inside the outside:  
winter, and the wind, the stars,  
the cry that goes  
unuttered  
out upon the tide of night.

## Love Poem

Gone, you have  
become  
essential form,

a kind of light  
breaking  
in my heart.

Still, my hand  
touches  
out towards . . .

but cannot.  
Gone,  
you have become

all inner:  
gone,  
you have become

## A Crab's Shell in my Hand

'When you make two into one  
and what is within like what is without  
and what is without like what is within  
. . . then you shall enter the kingdom.'

Gnostic Gospel of Thomas

And I've come back to other homes  
I've cast off, crept  
into those rooms which bear my imprint still,

familiar yet outgrown spaces shaped  
according to my image.  
And I've listened to the way they sound,

how resonant they are to fluctuating  
tides of memory, yet  
no longer do their forms encompass all I am.

Now, instead I have been washed up  
on a changing shore,  
reflecting on this crab's shell in my hand,

knowing: when the outside is within,  
and the inside, out,  
at last I'll find a home within my heart;

cradled in the hollow of the world's palm,  
the sky my carapace,  
its maze of patterns, constellated stars.

## The Shag

A black rent in silken cloth, the shag  
squats on the wooden pile,  
wings outspread to dry.  
Still as a gaping hole in the world.  
Quicksilver water stirs uneasily  
beneath the shadow's spell.  
Even the stratus cloud is pressed down,  
conforming to water's curve.  
Sky-fabric, sea-fabric, cloth  
and lining, for a moment rumples,  
then is smoothed out right across the mud.  
Crabs scuttle. A snail creeps.  
The shag folds its wings, shakes  
the black quills into place  
and with extraordinarily-focused intent  
stretches its long neck  
out and down towards the water.  
Beak, head, neck and lean black body  
follow the seeing eye. Then  
plunges down,  
down, ferocious arc of beak  
slashing  
down into the water.  
The whole bird is weapon now.  
A thread of silver  
sliced from the cloth, glints,  
a sliver twisting briefly in light.  
Then gone. The shag  
rinses itself in the sea, lifts  
its narrow head, looks,  
and follows its gaze into flight.

Patiently, the wind  
darns the torn material.

## Shag Rock.

No shags today, but there a girl is standing,  
very still. Through distant  
eyes her wings are spread across the ocean.

Flying is a wonderful experience. Inwardly  
we circle one another,  
feeling how our senses skim the other's surfaces

as lightly as these black-backed gulls  
the cresting waves, and how  
we weave the space between us with awareness.

It is much more than glancing. I feel  
I ride the winds that sweep  
across the open reaches of her heart, spiralling

downward, she the still centre of my vortices  
while simultaneously, wings  
of hers are striding into me upon the air I breathe . . .

Yesterday beside Shag Rock a girl was standing  
very still, and I was standing  
there as well, quite near and each of us

aware and stretched as taut as that black rock  
erect against the sky,  
and loose, as loose and free as air

# The Theory of Visionary Knowledge in Islamic Philosophy

HENRY CORBIN

The visionary literature of Islam, both Arabic and Persian, is considerable. The versions and commentaries which exist of the *Mi'rāj*, of the Prophet's celestial assumption on the night of that visionary experience which all Islamic mystics have aspired to reproduce and to relive – these versions and their variants alone run to considerable numbers. From the Shiite point of view, there is in addition a vast body of visionary literature relating to the appearances of each of the twelve Imams and of her who is the originator of their line, the Prophet's daughter Fatima.<sup>1</sup>

However, this is not an aspect on which I can dwell in the present short essay. The question to be asked, solely and essentially, is how the visionary fact itself appears to certain Islamic thinkers, how they explain it, and how it is that they do not question what we call the objectivity of these facts, even though it is an objectivity different from that which is commonly designated such by our human sciences.

From the start, Islamic prophetology postulates and expresses a gnosiology, a doctrine of knowledge which must be taken into consideration before embarking on any enquiry into the phenomenology of visionary experience among the Islamic spirituals. The reason for this is that Islam, youngest of the three branches of the Abrahamic tradition, is essentially a prophetic religion, and it inherited the theology of the *Verus Propheta* which was professed by early Judaeo-Christianity. The influence of this inheritance is still evident in Shiism, where Imamology is the necessary complement of prophetology and raises problems which are inherited from Christology.

The necessity we speak of arises because the conviction which characterises our Islamic philosophers, especially in Iranian Islamic philosophy, is that the Angel of knowledge and the Angel of revelation



are one and the same Angel, designated in the Koran as Gabriel and as the Holy Spirit. The theory of knowledge that Avicenna and Suhrawardī inherited from the Greek philosophers underwent a transposition in relation to their prophetic philosophy, which enabled it to account simultaneously for the revelation vouchsafed to the prophets, for the inspiration imparted to the holy Imams, and for the knowledge imparted to the philosophers. The work of Suhrawardī in the twelfth century is especially significant in this connection, and is echoed by the ecstatic confessions and doctrines of Ibn 'Arabī in the thirteenth century. To this the work of Mullā Sadrā Shirāzī (seventeenth century) in Ispahan and Shiraz provides the necessary complement. Finally, the Shaikhī School at Kerman, during the last century and even today, has continued to contribute in a profound and original manner to the theory of visionary knowledge, to what we might call visionary optics. These are the great themes with which I will be concerned in the course of this brief talk.

The body of *ḥadīth* or Shiite traditions contains the most comprehensive account, giving rise to equally lengthy commentaries, of the gnosiology postulated by the concept of *nubuwwat*, the prophetic vocation or mission. There exists among others a long lesson on this theme, given by the sixth Imam Ja'far al-Sādiq.<sup>2</sup> The condition of *nabī* or prophet consists of four levels, from that of the *nabī* pure and simple, herald of a didactic prophecy, to that of the messenger *nabī* (*mursal*), and, most important, that of messenger *nabī* (*rasūl*) as the herald of a legislative prophecy – that is to say, the *nabī* who is charged with revealing a new Book, a new religious Law. The prophetic revelation thus comprises six great periods: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad – seven if we include David, the psalmist king. We should remember that in practice, the condition designated in Shiism as *walī Allāh*, the Friend of God (the word 'saint' is inadequate) is equivalent to the spiritual condition of the ancient *nabīs* of Israel, who were not charged with the mission of revealing a Book. The *walayat* which invests the Friend of God is defined as the inner, esoteric aspect of the prophetic message.

To each of these levels of *nabī* there corresponds a mode of visionary knowledge, characterizing his vocation. The two first levels of *nabī*, who are not messengers, communicate with the *Malakūt* or spiritual world in dreams. This communication may take the form of a vision, or it may

simply consist of hearing, of the perception of a voice unaccompanied by the perception of the face and form of the celestial speaker. In principle, this was also the mode of visionary perception granted to the holy Imams of Shiism. The messenger *nabī*, *mursal* as well as *rasūl*, is distinguished by the fact that he is able to have visual and auditory perception of the Angel not only in dreams but also in a state of waking – or, as it is probably more accurate to say, in the intermediary state between sleeping and waking. On this foundation, the Shiite philosophers (Sadrā Shīrāzī, Qāzī Sa'īd Qummī, and others) built up a complex system of prophetic gnosiology, examining in detail the conditions of vision, the organ of visionary perception, and the 'place' where the visionary event occurs, literally 'where it takes place'. This is why we believe that their enquiries constitute as it were the first chapter of any phenomenology of visionary awareness in Islam, and by this I mean the actions whereby the human being is aware of entry into another world, a world that we will call the *Malakūt*. These entries into another world are facts to which the visionaries of Judaism as well as of Christianity and Islam bear witness, and the task of phenomenology is to demonstrate the validity of their testimony. All so-called positive critiques, therefore, which postulate or conclude with the nullity of vision, are destructive of the very *phainomenon* which they are concerned with 'establishing', and they remain, quite simply, alien to it.

On the other hand, and for the fundamental reason which I have explained, a work of Islamic philosophy always ends with an account, occupying at least the final chapter, of this essential theme of 'prophetic philosophy', of which the Arabic term *hikmat nabawwīya* is an exact rendering. A distinguished, not to say pioneering, position in the tradition of this prophetic philosophy is occupied, it seems to us, by the person and work of Shihābuddīn Yahyā Suhrawardī, known as the *Shaykh al-Ishrāq*, through whom the existence of an Iranian Islamic philosophy properly speaking was assured.

Suhrawardī came from Azerbaidjan (the Arabicised form of the name of the north-eastern province, which is nowadays called by its old Iranian name of *Azerābādgan*, the country of the Temple of Fire). His boldness led to his death as a martyr for his cause at the age of thirty-six, at Aleppo, on the 29th July 1191. In spite of his premature departure from this world, in the flower of his youth, the work he left behind him is substantial enough for its main themes to be distinguished with ease,

and for us to understand the influence it has continued to exercise in Iran up to the present day. The philosopher refers over and over again in his work to his great life project, which is deliberately and unabashedly outlined in one of his treatises. This project was the reviving of the philosophy of Light professed by the Sages of ancient Persia – a project, as he was well aware, in which he had no predecessor.<sup>3</sup> This is the first distinguishing aspect of this doctrine.

The second distinguishing aspect is the fact that he considers philosophical inquiry as inseparable from spiritual experience, particularly the mystical experience known as *ta'alluh*, which is the equivalent in Arabic of the Greek *theosis*. A philosophy which does not lead to spiritual fulfilment is a fruitless waste of time; yet mystical experience which is not founded on a solid philosophical education is open to all the vagaries of what goes today by the name of schizophrenia.

Broadly speaking, these are the two characteristics of Suhrawardī's doctrine of the *Ishrāq*. The word signifies the light of the star when it rises in its 'Orient', and it qualifies such knowledge as 'oriental' (*ishrāqī*), of which the nearest Latin equivalent is *cognitio matutina*. Traditionally, the catalogues oppose the 'Orientals' to the Peripatetics (the *Mash-sha'ūn*), and consider them the 'Platonists of Persia', the *Ishrāqīyān-e Irān*.

The second of these two characteristics bears out immediately the identification, mentioned at the beginning, between the active Intelligence of the philosophers and the figure from the archangelic pleroma who is known to the theological tradition as Gabriel, the Angel of revelation. To see in this identification anything resembling a rationalisation of the Spirit is totally to misunderstand the significance of the Arabic terms 'Aql (the equivalent of the Greek *Nous*, Intelligence) and *Rūh* (Spirit). It is actually the concept of the Word (*Kalima*) in Suhrawardī which effects the union between the Angel of knowledge and the Angel of revelation, enabling us to see them as one and the same figure. This figure is known by other names, especially by the Persian name of *Jāvidān Kharad*, the literal equivalent of *Sophia aeterna*.<sup>4</sup> We should recall here that the faithful lovers surrounding Dante spoke of 'Madonna Intelligenza', who is not to be confused with the 'Goddess Reason'.

Through this identification of the Angel of knowledge with the Angel of revelation, the theory of visionary knowledge which is imparted to prophets and mystics is shown to be inseparable from the gnosiology postulated by the philosophers; for the same Angel or Holy Spirit leads

prophets and philosophers alike to the attainment of that supreme condition of the intellect of the human soul which is designated by the term *'aql qudsī, intellectus sanctus*. It follows that any attempt to impose upon Islamic philosophy a conception and a limit which deprive it of all that is nowadays considered irrational or trans-rational, amounts to a brutal mutilation of this philosophy, the imposition on it of a concept originating, perhaps, in the 'Age of Enlightenment' (*Aufklärung*), but which is out of context here. In the absence of this concept, we are in a better position to understand the schematisations which associate the vocations of philosopher and prophet, as in the work of the seventeenth century Iranian philosopher, Mīr Abū'l-Qāsim Fendereskī, and of many others.<sup>5</sup>

In this way, the second distinguishing aspect of *Isḥrāq* makes us aware of the context within which the theory of visionary knowledge takes place. The first distinguishing aspect of the doctrine – the return, as we observed above, to the Sages of ancient Persia – brings us to the same conclusion. What the Shaykh al-Isḥrāq actually envisages when speaking of the philosophy of Light of the ancient Persian Sages is the doctrine practised by a community of Chosen people who are different from the dualist Mages. This community centres on the line of the ecstatic sovereigns of ancient Iran, part of the Kayanid dynasty, which is of interest in that it oversteps the boundaries of chronology. Its greatest representatives are Fereydūn and Kay Khusraw,<sup>6</sup> after whom the *Khusruvāniyūn* are so named. These gnostics and visionary Sages were seen by our Shaykh as the precursors of the *Ishraqiyyūn*, 'Oriental' philosophers in the metaphysical sense of the word.

Two new points emerge here which are of capital importance for our inquiry. The first of these is that the vision vouchsafed to these ecstatic sovereigns of ancient Persia was the vision of the Light of Glory which is designated in the Avesta by the term *Xvarnah* (Persian *Khurrah*). In this *Xvarnah* or Light of Glory, Suhrawardī perceives what he elsewhere calls the *Sakina*, the equivalent in Arabic of the Hebrew *Shekhina*. The *Sakina* is the descent of the divine Lights into the soul-temple of the mystic, there to dwell forever. The second point is the conjunction of the *Xvarnah* with the 'Muhammadan Light' (*Nūr muhammadi*), whose transmission from prophet to prophet in Islamic prophetology corresponds to the epiphanies of the *Verus Propheta* in Judaeo-Christian prophetology. Iranian prophetism is thus integrated to Semitic prophetism,

both Biblical and Koranic. The significance of these two points cannot be overestimated in any account of the integral heritage of the Abrahamic prophetic tradition.

Such is the background from which the *ishraqī* doctrine of visionary knowledge, or hierognosis, emerges. Its two distinguishing aspects make it plain to us why one of Suhravardī's main concerns was the establishment of a cosmology and an anthropology in which an essential, even a dominant, position would be occupied by the optics of vision, since it fulfils an indispensable function. Hence his continual concern to establish the ontology of the three worlds, designated respectively as the *Jabarūt*, the world of pure cherubic Intelligences; the *Malakūt*, the intermediary world of the Soul; and the *Mulk*, the material world of sense perception.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, these three worlds are designated respectively as the world of the 'greater Words', the pure Intelligences – the *Angeli intellectuales* of Latin Avicennan tradition; the world of the 'intermediary Words', the *Angeli* or *Animae caelestes*; and the world of the 'lesser Words', the human souls.<sup>8</sup> Of these three worlds, the intermediary world of the *Malakūt*, of the Soul, plays an essential part in the theory of visionary knowledge. The world of the Soul is intermediary between our world of sense perception and the higher world of the *Jabarūt*, of the pure archangelic Intelligences. The means whereby we may penetrate this intermediary world is neither through the faculties of sensible perception, nor through the *virtus intellectualis*, but is properly through the active Imagination. Similarly, the *Animae caelestes*, who do not possess sensible perception, possess pure imaginative perception.

Suhravardī has different names for this intermediary world, which is properly that of visionary knowledge. It is the 'eighth clime' in relation to the seven climes known to classical geography. It is designated by a Persian term coined by Suhravardī: *Nā-kujā-ābād*, the country of Non-where – not a utopia but a real country, a real place, which nevertheless cannot be placed or located in any clime of the world which is accessible to external perception.<sup>9</sup> It is also the 'meeting-place of the two seas' (Koran 18:60), the sea of the senses and the sea of the intellect. Even more commonly, it is called the '*ālam al-mithāl*', which I have had to translate by the Latin *mundus imaginalis* in order to avoid any confusion of its *imaginal* reality with the unreality of the imaginary.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the dual aspect of the function of the active Imagination as

perceived by Suhravardī leads to the differentiation, established by Paracelsus, between the *Imaginatio vera* of the visionary contemplatives in the true sense of the word, and the 'phantasy' (*Phantasey*) which is the touchstone of madness. The *mundus imaginalis* is not the world of phantoms shown on the cinema screen, but the world of 'subtle bodies', the world of the sensible-spiritual.

In this way, Suhravardī set himself the task of ensuring the ontological status due to the *mundus imaginalis*, because he was well aware that if this world were to disappear, if all trace of it were lost, then all the visions of the prophets, all the visionary experiences of the mystics, and all the events of the Resurrection would lose their place – would literally 'have no place', because their place is neither the sensible world nor the intelligible world, but the intermediary world, the 'eighth clime', the world where the corporeal is spiritualised and the spiritual takes on body. The disappearance of this world resulted, for example, in the disappearance, with the advent of Averroism, of the hierarchy of the *Animae caelestes*. Once this world has disappeared, we are reduced to making an *allegory* of it, because *eo ipso* the function of the active Imagination has been degraded and reduced merely to the production of what is imaginary. For this reason, the ontology of the *mundus imaginalis*, as the world of visions and of visionary experiences, induced the Shaykh al-Ishrāq to found a metaphysics of the Imagination which was later expanded by Mullā Sadrā Shīrāzī, the great *ishraqī* philosopher of seventeenth century Ispahan. In short, the ontology of the *imaginal world* presupposes a metaphysics of the active Imagination, and in the absence of such a metaphysics there can be no theory of visionary knowledge.

This metaphysics of the active Imagination finds expression in a schema which derives from the Aristotelian schema of the faculties of the soul, although it differs from it in that Aristotle probably did not have in mind a theory of prophetic knowledge as visionary experience. Furthermore, in his great 'Book of Oriental Theosophy' (*Hikmat al-Ishrāq*), Suhravardī simplified the schema by reducing – rightly – the representative or passive imagination, the estimative faculty, and the active Imagination to one faculty possessing different functions. This reduction had been preceded by a phenomenology of the *sensorium* (the *hiss mushtarik*), in which the latter is described as a mirror which reflects both the images deriving from sense perception and the images

proceeding from the perception of the *intellectus sanctus* ('intellective images', 'amthila 'aqliya or metaphysical images). This also illustrates the ambiguity of the active Imagination, the dual function which Suhrawardi was so careful to distinguish, since on it depended the very validity of visionary perception and experience.

The *sensorium* is the inner sense upon which all the perceptions of the external senses converge. In its representative and passive capacity, the imagination is merely the treasury in which are preserved the images projected onto the *sensorium*, as onto a mirror, by the perceptions of sense. In its active capacity as *virtus combinativa*, the Imagination is as it were caught between two fires, and becomes itself an in-between. It can serve the so-called estimative (*wahm*) faculty which animals also possess, but which in man's case compels him to make judgements contrary to the demands of the intellect. Reduced to this level, the active Imagination can produce only what is imaginary, fantastic, or even absurd. On the other hand, when it serves the intellect or *Nous*, it is called *mufakkira*, meaning cogitative or meditative. It is the means of entry into the reality of the *mundus imaginalis*, the place of prophetic visions, the level at which visionary perceptions occur. It too projects images onto the *sensorium* – no longer imitative images (*muhākāt*) of sense perceptions, but of the pure intelligible world. These intellective or metaphysical images are in correspondence with the invisible forms of the *Jabarūt*, and make it possible to have visionary perception of them.

The *sensorium*, therefore, being a mirror, ensures not only the 'objectivity' of the images formed as a result of sense perception, but also that of the images arising from supra-sensible perception. This mirror phenomenon leads our philosophers to express themselves in terms of mystical catoptrics,<sup>11</sup> the consequences of which are far-reaching. What may prevent the occurrence of the mirror phenomenon? What may prevent this mirror from reflecting the images of the supra-sensible world? It is, of course, possible for the external senses to keep the *sensorium* entirely occupied with the objects of sense perception, as in the case of the majority of men. Nevertheless, even when the active Imagination is serving the intellect, two cases may arise: that of the philosopher and that of the prophet. In the case of the philosopher,<sup>12</sup> the intellect retains only the mental vision of the forms, without their imitative images being projected onto the *sensorium*. In the



case of the prophet, the forms contemplated are the same, but their imitative images are projected onto the mirror of the *sensorium* in such a way that they become so many events in the life of the soul. It may be said that there is all the difference in the world between these two; but it must not be forgotten that in the conception of Suhravardī and the Ishrāqiyun, the perfect Sage is he in whom the *intellectus sanctus*, illuminated by the Angel-Holy Spirit, is able to combine the vision of the prophet with that of the philosopher. Such a man is truly the Sage of God, the *theosophos*.

In short, we should bear in mind that there is a double symmetrical movement, a fact which led Suhravardī to characterise the active Imagination by the symbol of steam, because steam is both fire and water. The active Imagination fulfils a double function: it causes the sensible to rise to the imaginal state, and it causes the purely intelligible to descend to it. It rarefies and condenses, spiritualises and makes corporeal; and this is what is meant by *caro spiritualis*.<sup>13</sup> To use a word which is current today, we could say that there occurs an *anamorphosis* to the level of the *mundus imaginalis*. This is so when the active Imagination is at the service of the *intellectus sanctus*. But as we know, it is threatened by an ambiguity. Instead of being the instrument of the supra-sensible *mundus imaginalis*, it may remain enslaved to the sensible world and its frenzies. Suhravardī described this ambiguity in terms of arresting symbolism. When serving the *intellectus sanctus*, the active Imagination is the 'blessed Tree' mentioned in the Koranic verse of the Light (24:35). Belonging 'neither to the East nor to the West', it is neither purely intellectual nor purely material. It is the Tree which springs on the summit of Sinai (23:30), the Tree whose fruits are those divine sciences which, says the Shaykh al-Ishrāq, are the 'bread of the soul' as well as the 'bread of the Angels'. This tree is in fact the Burning Bush whose call was heard by Moses in the blessed valley (28:30)<sup>14</sup>, and in which blazed the Angel-Holy Spirit of Revelation. On the other hand, when the Imagination continues to be a slave to the estimative faculty, it is the 'cursed Tree' (17:62), the Iblis-Satan of the soul,<sup>15</sup> he who refuses to bow down before God's Word and caliph, who induces the soul to deny the realities of the spiritual world and to wander in the realm of the imaginary – in short, the 'demon of agnosticism'. In this way, the valorisation of the active Imagination in its spiritual capacity is perfectly balanced by a warning.



In identifying the visionary Imagination with the Burning Bush, Suhravardī points to the source of all perceptions and visions of the immaterial Lights and beings of light. The soul itself becomes this Burning Bush through the fiery presence of the *Sakina*. Reference should be made here to the descriptions of photisms which occur in almost all the works written by our Shaikh. Sometimes the tone is one of peace: 'The prophets and great mystical theosophers', he says, 'can have knowledge of supra-sensible things while in a state of waking . . . The appearance shown to them can penetrate to the sensorium and hold most delightful converse with them, manifesting itself to them as the most lovely and noble of forms . . . Sometimes they hear someone's voice without seeing the speaker. All these', he says, 'are figures which enter the active Imagination, and which are communicated to the sensorium through the active Imagination.'<sup>16</sup> At times, too, the tone is somewhat dramatic. The visionary, recalling verse 27:63,<sup>17</sup> speaks of the violent wind which precedes the visitation of the luminous host, heralded by the lightning of the *Ishrāq*.<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, all this takes place in the *mundus imaginalis*.

We should now trace the visionary topography of this *mundus imaginalis* in the vast work of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabī (1240), perhaps the greatest visionary theosopher of all time. There could be no better introduction to this work than what we have just learned of the doctrine of the Shaykh al-Ishrāq, for the metaphysics of the Imagination in Ibn 'Arabī is an extension, in more ways than one, of Suhravardī's, and of it only a brief glimpse can be given in the book that we have devoted to him.\* For him, too, the science of the visionary Imagination arises from the science of mirrors, from mystical catoptrics. He postulated the difference between *muttasil* imagination, united with and immanent within man, and *mumfasil* imagination, separable and autonomous, which is the *mundus imaginalis* of the *Malakūt*. 'Absolute Imagination' is the union of the two.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the simple representative imagination, corresponding to the imagination which is subject to the estimative faculty (*wahm*) and which contains only that which is imaginary, 'the heart's concentration (*himmā*) creates something which exists outside the seat of this faculty'.<sup>20</sup> When Ibn 'Arabī uses the word 'creates' in this manner, the

\*Suhravardī: *L'Archange Empourpré*, Fayard, 1976.

expression in no way connotes the idea of an illusory fiction or of hallucination. It connotes essentially the union, the interdependence which allies them to each other, of the personal Lord (*Rabb*) and him whose personal Lord he is (the *marbūb*). The *Rabb* is not the *Abconditum*. He is at the level of the third theophany in the cosmogony of Ibn 'Arabī. The interdependence of *rabb* and *marbūb* is what the Shaykh al-Akbar calls the *sirr al-rubūbiya*, the secret of the condition of divine lordship. This secret, as such, is the secret of theophanic visions and of all visionary experiences. It corresponds to the arresting phrase which comes in the 'Acts of Peter': *Eum talem vidi qualem capere potui*. I saw him such as it lay within my power to comprehend him.<sup>21</sup> This power in Ibn 'Arabī is revealed in the course of many densely-written pages: recitals of entry into the *mundus imaginis*, sight of the Temple in its spiritual dimension, and many more.<sup>22</sup>

We have already mentioned Mullā Sadrā Shirāzī (1640), the most celebrated exponent of the School of Ispahan in seventeenth century Iran. He was an *ishrāqī* thinker who was steeped in the thought of Suhrawardī (whom he commentated at length), in the meditation of the Shiite traditions of the holy Imams, and in the reading of Ibn 'Arabī. I will only refer here to one of his favourite theses, which he defended particularly in his great commentary on the corpus of Kulaynī's Shiite traditions: the Imagination is a spiritual faculty which does not perish with the physical organism, because it is independent of this organism and because it is as it were the subtle body of the soul.<sup>23</sup> It is easy to perceive the importance of this thesis in relation to the phenomenology of visionary awareness.

Now, this thesis accords with the thesis upheld previously by John Philoponus in his commentary on Aristotle's treatise *De Anima*. John Philoponus considered the *sensorium* itself to be incorporeal and as constituting the spiritual subtle body.<sup>24</sup> Without underestimating the differences between the School of Ispahan and the School of Kerman in south-eastern Iran, whose shaikhs have carried on the teaching of Shaikh Ahmad Ahsā'ī (1824) throughout the nineteenth century and down to our day, we may observe that in the case of the latter the subtle body plays a similar part in the phenomenology of visionary experience.

All the shaikhs of this School were prolific, rivalling Ibn 'Arabī in the quantity and scope of their works. A lifetime would be barely long

enough to assimilate them in their entirety! To end this brief account, I must not omit to mention an important work which Muhammad Karīm-Khān Kermānī (1870) devoted to visionary optics, the science of visions. This work, written in Arabic, was expanded in Persian by the author's own son and successor, Muhammad Khān-Kermānī (1906), during a teaching session given to the *shaikhie madrasah* which lasted for several years. Together the two works, which are inseparable from each other, cover a total of more than 1,300 pages in large format in -8°. <sup>25</sup> And this is only one work among many others written by our shaikhs.

I will quote here only a few important lines from this great work on the science of visions. We read: 'the sensorium is the Imagination itself (*bintāsiyā*, *phantasis*), that is to say, the subtle body which belongs to the world of *Hūrqalyā*'. <sup>26</sup> This subtle body which derives from the mystical city of *Hūrqalyā* has been the subject of lengthy research on my part, because it is a characteristic thesis of the *shaikhie* School. Even more than with John Philoponus, it accords with the thesis found in Proclus of the *okhēma*, the subtle vehicle of the soul. <sup>27</sup> This imperishable subtle body is made up of a handful of each of the heavens of the subtle world or *Malakūt*, from its Earth to its Throne, which is the 9th Sphere. These handfuls of heaven, which constitute the heavens of the Imagination, are the supports for the soul's operations and for its illuminating action. <sup>28</sup> The result is an ascent from inner heaven to heaven, at the summit of which may arise the visionary experience, the perception of apparitional forms which manifest the invisible beings of the *Malakūt*.

Here again we have occasion to use the word *anamorphoses*. Indeed, the vast commentary composed of the lessons which were given by Muhammad Khān-Kermānī on his father's work contains the following: 'This science of visionary perception is the same as the science of perspective and of mirrors, except that the latter is concerned mainly with the external modality (the exoteric aspect or *zāhir*), whereas in the case of the former it is the inner aspect (the esoteric aspect or *bātin*) which is the main concern.' <sup>29</sup>

The essential is stated in a few lines. The theory of visionary knowledge and experience derives from mystical catoptrics; it provides every treatise *De perspectiva* with an extension which embraces the perspectives and figures of the *Malakūt*, the spiritual world which is not subject to the senses.

I have done no more here than indicate a few chapter headings.

Nevertheless, I hope that this will give a sufficient idea of the importance that a theory of visionary knowledge has for the spirituality of Islam.

From: *Nouvelles de l'Institut Catholique de Paris*, No. 1, Feb. 1977: 'Les Visions Mystiques'.

Translated by Liadain Sherrard

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See in particular my book *En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971, 1978 all of Book 7, vol. IV: the dream appearances of Fâtima as the spiritual initiator of the princess Narkès, the manifestations of the 12th Imam, etc.
- <sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 238 ff., and vol. IV, general index s.v. prophètes.
- <sup>3</sup> See the statement that he made, both daring and explicit, in his treatise entitled 'The Word of Sufism', trans. in the collection which I have called *L'Archange empourpré: quinze traités et récits mystiques*, translated from Persian and Arabic, with an introduction and notes by H. Corbin (Coll. Documents spirituels), Paris, Fayard, 1976/1986, p. 170.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 293, 307, 333, 347.
- <sup>5</sup> See S.-J. Ashtiyānī and H. Corbin, *Anthologie des philosophes iraniens depuis le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à nos jours*, vol. I, Bibliothèque Iranienne 18, Teheran-Paris, Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1972, pp. 33–39 of the French part [partic française publiée in: *La philosophie islamique iranienne aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1981.]
- <sup>6</sup> See the pages translated from the 'Livre des Tablettes dédiées à l'émir 'Imādoddin', in *L'Archange empourpré*, op. cit., pp. 110–112 and the relevant notes.
- <sup>7</sup> See my book *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection: de l'Iran mazdéen à l'Iran shi'ite*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1961/1979, p. 189 ff. (English translation by Nancy Pearson, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: from Mazdean Iran to Shiite Iran*, Bollingen Series XCI, Princeton University Press 1977).
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. *L'Archange empourpré*, op. cit., p. 234 ff.
- <sup>9</sup> See *En Islam iranien*, op. cit., vol. IV, index s.v. Nā-Kojā-ābād.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, index s.v. imaginal, mundus imaginalis.
- <sup>11</sup> See *L'Archange empourpré*, op. cit., index s.v. connaissance visionnaire (théorie de la), Imagination, katoptrique, miroir, etc.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150–152, notes 17 to 30, and pp. 177–178, notes 34 to 38.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337, notes 62 and 64.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 113–116, 130–131, notes 87 to 96.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168 ff. and 177 ff.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, text of the 'Livre des Tablettes', p. 105.
- <sup>17</sup> 'He sends the wind as a herald before his Mercy'.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, end of the 'Livre des Temples de la Lumière', p. 65, p. 86, note 109, p. 88, notes 118, and 119.
- <sup>19</sup> See my book *L'Imagination créatrice dans le soufisme d'Ibn 'Arabi*, Paris, Flammarion 1958, pp. 162–163; 2nd edition 1977. (English translation by R. Mannheim, *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, Bollingen Series XCI, Princeton University Press 1969.)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *En Islam iranien*, op. cit., vol. I, p. XXII, 165 note 135. See also my study 'Epiphanie divine et naissance spirituelle dans la gnose ismaélienne', in *Temps cyclique et gnose ismaélienne*, Paris, Berg International, 1982. (English translation by R. Mannheim and J. W. Morris, *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, London, Kegan Paul, 1983.)

<sup>22</sup> See *L'Imagination créatrice*, op. cit., p. 175, p. 255 note 169, p. 277 note 327.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *En Islam iranien*, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 243–244, and vol. IV, general index s.v. *Sadrā Shirāzi*.

<sup>24</sup> See *L'Archange empourpré*, op. cit., p. 75 note 12.

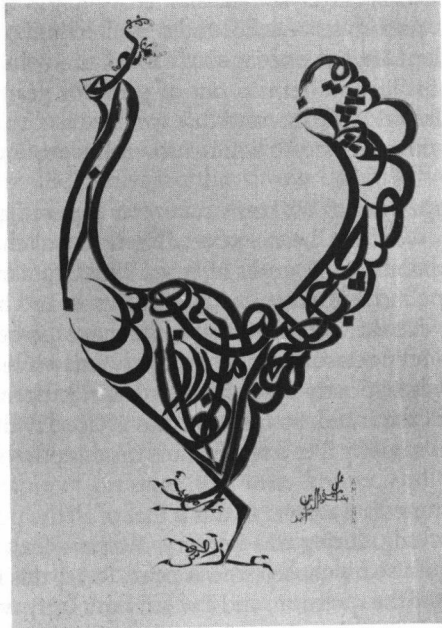
<sup>25</sup> Muhammad Karīm-Khān Kermānī, *Kitāb Ta'wīl al-ahādith fi 'ilm al-rū'ya*, followed by the *Dorūs* (lessons in Persian) of Muhammad Khān-Kermānī, Kermān, 1354 A.H./1975, 2 vols., large in-8°, 62 + 605 pages and 76 + 580 pages.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., vol. I, fasl II, p. 9 of the Arabic text.

<sup>27</sup> See *Terre céleste et corps de résurrection*, op. cit., pp. 146–164.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *'Ilm al-rū'ya*, I, pp. 16–17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., I, p. 187 of the Persian text.



*The Peacock's Excuse*

Next came the peacock, in all its splendour

## Reviews

### The Bardic Voice

*The Collected Poems of Vernon Watkins* (Golgonooza Press, Ipswich, 1986), pp. 495, £19.50.

The publication of this magnificent book poses a problem which should deeply trouble all those concerned with the lot of English poetry. Quite clearly Vernon Watkins is one of the few poets of this century who have truly enriched our poetic heritage. It is not a matter of whether or not he is a 'great poet' in the sense that Yeats or Eliot may be termed great poets. It is enough to say that he has written poems – and not just a handful of poems – which for their imaginative intelligence, beauty and power stand head and shoulders above the run-of-the-mill poetry published in our literary magazines and journals – indeed, above any poetry published over the last fifty odd years except that by the four poets with whom he is compared on the dust-cover of this book, namely, Yeats, Eliot, Muir and Dylan Thomas. This being the case, how is it that Watkins's original publishers – who could well claim to be the leading publishers of modern English poetry – have let all the volumes of his poetry published during his lifetime remain out of print for years – and the same applies to their *Selected Watkins* – and that we have had to wait for close on twenty years since the poet's death before his work is produced in a form that does justice to it?

To say that recognition of Watkins's stature as a poet has been withheld largely because his work has been inaccessible is to put the cart before the horse. Collected editions of the works of Yeats, Eliot, Muir and Dylan Thomas were in each case published during the poet's lifetime, and have been kept in print. Presumably what this signifies is that while there has been a demand for the works of these four poets sufficient to make it worth while for a commercial publisher to keep their poetry available, this has not been the case where Watkins's poetry is concerned. So basically one is faced with the question of what it is in Watkins's poetry that is responsible for this otherwise inexplicable neglect.

I think that the immediate answer to this is that of all the poets of his calibre who have been writing during this century, Watkins least of all has been prepared to compromise his chosen role as poet. To say this is perhaps to beg rather than to answer the question, and I will try to clarify what I mean by it. Somewhere Paul Valéry makes a remark to the effect that what the average reader most responds to and values in poetry are precisely those aspects of it which least correspond to poetry but which on the contrary approach the

condition of prose. Now English poetry during the last one-hundred-and-fifty years and more has been bedevilled by the fact that the kind of discrimination to which Valéry points has been rendered more or less meaningless because, with very few exceptions, both poets themselves and their readers have so underplayed the distinction between poetry and prose that to all intents and purposes it has ceased to exist. To put this in another way one could say that with but little exception English poetry over the last one-hundred-and-fifty years has very much been held in thrall by the spirit of Wordsworth – or at least by the kind of poetics propounded by Wordsworth in his Prefaces (1800 and 1802) to the *Lyrical Ballads*.

Briefly, what these Prefaces constitute is a charter licensing the would-be poet to regard himself as a poet while disregarding the function and nature of poetry as these had always, traditionally speaking, been understood. His principal object in writing the *Lyrical Ballads* was, Wordsworth states, 'to make the incidents of common life interesting'. In so doing, he continues, he has 'endeavoured to bring [his] language near to the real language of men'. This means that 'there will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction', and the reason for this is that 'I do not doubt that it may be safely affirmed, that there neither is, nor can be, any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition'. 'Poetry sheds no tears "such as Angels weep", he affirms', but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose . . .'

As for what Wordsworth regards as the proper content of poetry – these subjects 'from common life' – this is equated with those 'sympathies in which without any other discipline than that of our daily life we are fitted to take delight'. These sympathies he identifies as 'the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men'; and when he asks himself with what these passions and thoughts and feelings are connected, he answers: 'Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations.' In this way not only is the distinction between poetry and prose obliterated, but the content of poetry is said to be prompted by the lowest common denominators of human nature and life. And if one asks what is the purpose of such poetry, the reply is that its chief end is to give pleasure: 'The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure'; for it is according to 'the grand elementary principle of pleasure' that man 'knows, and feels, and lives and moves.'

My contention is that such a view of the function and nature of poetry as that propounded by Wordsworth has eaten so deeply into the general consciousness of both poets and their readers over the last one-hundred-and-fifty odd years that it has conditioned far more than we are aware of not only the capacity to write poetry – that is to say, the type of poetry which poets write – but also the capacity to respond to poetry – that is to say, the ability of the average reader



to respond to any type of poetry other than that commended by Wordsworth. Poetry is expected to deal with the ordinary incidents of common life, with moral sentiments and animal sensations, and to do so in a language 'near to the real language of men' – a language stripped of poetic diction and made to approximate to everyday conversational prose. What is predicated, in other words, is a poetry that does not invoke or even acknowledge the great self-affirming realities of the Imagination, but is confined to the expression of purely individual responses – emotional, moral, mechanical – to man's situation in a time-bound, self-enclosed world and to a nature that is explored solely by the senses and the human reason. Indeed, in one particularly illuminating passage Wordsworth himself is constrained to say that the poet should be 'ready to follow the steps of the man of Science . . . , carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of Science itself', and that 'the remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Minerologist will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed.'

When I say therefore that of all poets of his calibre who have been writing during this century Watkins least of all has been prepared to compromise in his chosen role as poet, and that this has been responsible for his otherwise inexplicable neglect, what I mean is that from the very beginning he took his stand as a poet at somewhere close to the opposite pole to that at which poets writing within the Wordsworthian dispensation take their stand, and that he steadfastly refused to be shifted from it. As a consequence, the poetry he produced exhibits all those qualities to which the average reader, also nurtured within this dispensation, is least able to respond. It is poetry whose purpose is 'to make manifest what shall be' – that is to say, it is prophetic poetry, seeking to bring to birth the vision of the miraculous in the world before us, or, in his own words:

. . . to weigh the rocks on the  
level wings of a bird,  
To relate these undulations of time to a kestrel's  
motionless poise.

Watkins's poetry is therefore of a type that stands or falls by 'the one rapture of an inspiration', by the way in which it conveys the sense of 'the roll, the rise, the carol, the creation' moving through the universe not only far beyond the 'incidents of common life' but also beyond time and space and even death itself; and that seeks to do this in a style that elevates the language far above that of prose, a style that

. . . rhythmic finds in a discordant age,  
Singing like living fountains sprung from stone,  
Those unifying harmonies of line  
Torn from creative nature . . .



As such it is a poetry which does indeed boast of a 'celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose', and which may very well shed tears 'such as Angels weep'.

To say this is not to imply that Watkins's poetry is 'otherworldly' as this term is normally understood, still less that it beats its wings vainly in some fathomless void. On the contrary, it is rooted to a degree in the physical landscape of the poet's own earthly dwelling – the rocky coast of southern Wales. But this landscape, and the human, animal, bird and vegetable life that goes on within it, are never envisaged as ends in themselves, self-sufficient and self-contained. The whole bent of the poetry is to envisage them *sub specie aeternitatis*: to see them as the ever-renewed, ever renewing investitures of ever-living presences and beings whose true home is the divine Imagination; to break through time into the timeless, to enter the kingdom of love which is every moment, to build the city which all long for but which has not yet been built.

Yet in pursuit of such realization the poetry does not employ the language of argument or a language bordering on philosophical discourse, as for instance is the language of Eliot in pursuing a similar end in *The Four Quartets*. Watkins lacked perhaps the sheer intellectual mastery of Eliot and still more of Yeats (whose manner, it may be said in passing, occasionally irrupts into Watkins's poetry not invariably with good effect); and correspondingly his individual poems are not organized in such a way that each part of them is deployed with a view to its contribution to the over-all meaning of the whole poem – in such a way that each part of them is structured in accordance with an internal, almost logical development that runs coherently from the beginning of the poem to its concluding lines. On the contrary, the language is what one might call oracular and lyrical, as befits the poetry of prophecy. In this sense it might also well be called Pindaric. That is to say, the individual poems are organized above all round verbal nuclei that exist as it were in their own right: expressive units – not necessarily images – whose self-powered resonance coincides with the meaning to a point where you cannot distinguish the one from the other, and which as often as not are not connected with one another in any sequence that is accessible to logical perception.

This is not say that the individual poems do not constitute organic wholes. They do constitute such wholes. But their individual parts (invocation, occasion, prayer, moral, myth) are linked as it were contrapuntally, not apodictically. It is perhaps in this respect above all that Watkins makes no concession to the sensibility nurtured on the kind of poetics which have by and large dominated English poetry for the last century and a half. But if in this respect too he writes, as I have suggested, a type of poetry whose nature and function are exemplified by a poet such as Pindar, then he belongs to an artistic lineage whose relative non-appeal in our age is due, not to its own inadequacy, but to the gross limitations of the standards by which today for the most part poetry is assessed and judged.

Philip Sherrard

## Guardian of the Temple

*Temple and Contemplation* by Henry Corbin (translated by Philip Sherrard with the assistance of Liadain Sherrard). Islamic Texts & Contexts, series of the Institute of Ismaili Studies; KPI, London & New York, in association with Islamic Publications, London, 1986. 413 pages; £25 hardback, paperback £8.95.

Some years ago in Teheran I had the opportunity to join a discussion group on Ismaili gnosis organized by a genuine Ismaili gnostic from Bombay. When I asked him, 'Who is the greatest living mystical authority in Ismailism?', he answered . . . Henry Corbin!

Corbin himself (who died in 1978 shortly before the Iranian 'revolution') never embraced outward Islam – but in his long career he did more to revive, inspire, encourage and delight the devotees of Iranian spirituality than most birth-right Moslems. The Ismailis are not alone in considering him 'one of ours'; sufis, Shaykhis, Shiite gnostics, Zoroastrians and Christians all drank deep at the well of his scholarship, philosophy, sympathy, imagination and sheer unbounded love of the spirit.

In a festschrift published for Corbin shortly before his death, one of his French admirers contributed an essay which began with the words, 'Heretics of the world, unite!' Of course, Corbin's work is also valued by many who consider themselves bastions of various orthodoxies and upholders of 'Tradition'. Corbin looked for beauty and truth and took it where he found it; he engaged in no polemics on behalf of any one dogma or creed. This refusal to accept Authority disturbed certain of Corbin's readers amongst the hyper-orthodox 'right-hand' mystics and ultra-Traditionalists. They believed that Corbin's thinking opened the way to radical antinomian heresy, that at root he was something of a spiritual anarchist.

'The map is not the territory': no single definition will suffice to pigeon-hole Corbin, who was no mere map-maker but rather a *cartomancer*, a shaman-explorer of n-dimensional realms, too high to worry himself with the boundary-disputes of Flatlanders, mystagogues, ideologues and other beaurocrats of the spirit.

If this in itself constitutes heresy, then perhaps Corbin would have accepted the badge with some pride – and not without a touch of irony – like those sufis who gloried in being called 'blameworthy' by dull, pious bigots, and finally adopted the name as their own.

For the readers of *Temenos*, defenders of the Imagination not only against modernism but also against hyper-orthodoxy, Corbin's project needs no defense. And among Corbin's books, the latest above all demands attention from this journal because it takes as its theme the *temenos* itself:

In speaking of the *Imago Templi*, I intend to remain at the level of phenomenology, a 'temenology' if I may risk the word (from the Greek *temenos*, a sacred precinct), which exists at the level of the imaginal world ('*alām al-mithāl*'), the world in-between (*barzakh*), at 'the meeting-place of the two seas' . . .

[This] implies a situation which is above all speculative, in the etymological sense of the word: two mirrors (*specula*) facing each other and reflecting, one within the other, the Image that they hold. The Image does not derive from empirical sources. It precedes and dominates such sources, and is thus the criterion by which they are verified and their meaning is put to the test.

According to our philosophers' premisses of the metaphysics of the imaginal, the *Imago Templi* is the form assumed by a transcendent reality in order for this reality to be reflected in the soul at 'the meeting-place of the two seas.' Without such a form, this reality would be ungraspable. However, the *Imago Templi* is not allegorical but 'tautegorical'; that is to say, it should not be understood as concealing the Other whose form it is. It is to be understood in its identity with that Other, and as being itself the thing which it expresses.

(p. 276)

The essays in *Temple and Contemplation* appeared separately between 1950 and 1974, but the consistency of Corbin's preoccupation (or perhaps obsession) with the image of the temple graces this collection with a fluid coherence. On one level or another all Corbin's work deals with a central theme, that of the *Mundus Imaginalis*. In the present work (elegantly translated by Philip and Liadain Sherrard) he offers the Temple as a sort of quintessence of the Imaginal, a synthesizing into one 'spatial' complex of many a-temporal (or 'hierohistorical') modes. Elsewhere he gives us the topography of the *barzakh* (or Borderland) – here he unfolds its architecture, and elucidates the contemplative point or omphalos where the heavens and the human coincide – the sacred space.

The book begins with a prime example of Corbinian bravura, a pyrotechnic study of 'The Realism and Symbolism of Colours in Shiite Cosmology According to the 'Book of the Red Hyacinth' by Shaykh Muhammad Karim-Khan Kirmani (d. 1870).' Until Corbin, most scholars considered the Shaykhis a mere late and derivative sect of little interest save as a precursor of Babism – but Corbin discovered the brilliance of the sect's teachers and revelled in their alchemistic subtleties. In this exquisite essay about an essay about the colour red, Corbin divulges a teaching that outshines even the prismatic splendours of his *Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, a hermeneutic so advanced, hermetic and yet clear, that it justifies Shaykh Kirmani's boast of having revealed secrets never before openly discussed.

Kirmani came to write the essay literally on a dare. One of his disciples was challenged by a 'troublesome man' to explain the esoteric significance of the red dye in a carpet woven in Kerman, the Shaykh's home town. Not content with divulging the most altitudinous esoterisms to abash this troublesome fellow, the Shaykh even went so far as to include a secret Kermani recipe for the red dye used in carpets! The whole essay is a delight: the sort of thing one imagines Magicians and Angels reading for sheer pleasure as they lounge in the emerald palaces of Jabulsa and Jabulqa, the cities of the Imaginal World.

The discourse on colour – a physical phenomenon and yet of the nature of light – prepares us for the rest of the book and its exploration of the Temple, the physical/Imaginal *topos* of the ritual of light. First, in 'The Science of the Balance and the Correspondences Between Worlds in Islamic Gnosis', Corbin approaches his familiar ground – the hierarchy of 'worlds' and 'paradises' – from a new perspective, making use of the 14th century Shiite/sufi theosopher Haydar Amuli, as well as the early Ismaili alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan and his science of 'arithmosophic' correspondences. Using these divine geometers as guides he develops his theory of spiritual chivalry, of the 'horsemen (or knights-errant) of the Invisible' – guardians of the Temple – those 'absolutely free' gnostics who cross the bridge to meet the Angels and the Spirit descending into our world at the meeting-place of the two oceans, the Temple's site.

In 'Sabian Temple and Ismailism' (the earliest essay) he links the mysterious 'Sabians' of the Koran with pre-Islamic star-cults, the 'philosophic ritual' of the Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwan al-Safa*) of Basra, the angelology of the Illuminists (*Ishraqiyyun*) and the esoteric hermeneutics of Ismailism. Another dazzling display – ending with another of Corbin's subtle evocations of what might be heresy:

... the Ismaili Order could not break the discipline of the arcane during a Cycle of occultation. One does not expose the subtle, gentle light of the angelic world to the crude and glaring day of ready-made facts and social norms. It is not through addressing the multitude that one calls human beings to the 'potential Paradise' of the esoteric community. Far from it: if the Call is thus betrayed in the false light of day, it provides men with the surest means whereby to aggravate their earthly Hell, for then the image of Paradise is bound to be a provocation, stimulating their fury of perversion and mockery. If, that is, they do not find it boring in the extreme, for this image is indeed the image of a *Paradise lost*. The history of Ismailism may be no more than one long paradox: it was harder for it to survive its triumphs than to recover from its setbacks. More than once, Ismaili writers have captured the image of their great and noble dream in striking terms. They were perfectly aware of its opposition to the law which is the curse of this world, the urge to dominate, the ambition and vanity of power which make the soul the veritable habitation of Hell and which are truly the

'punishment of the black stone by the black stone. The famous eleventh-century Iranian Ismaili, Nāṣir-i Khusraw, in his Persian translation of a Koranic verse (82:19) to which he gives an unexpected force, prefigures in this way the future Reign of the Spirit: 'There will come a day when no soul will have command over any other soul, and on that day, yes, the Order will belong to God.'

(pp. 181–2)

As an aside, I would like to repeat my old belief that those scientists who are currently approaching mysticism through Quantum and other frontier aspects of physics and biology would do well to broaden their scope beyond the Far Eastern traditions (as in *The Tao of Physics*, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, etc.) and delve into sufism, and into Corbin. The next essay in *Temple and Contemplation*, 'The Configuration of the Temple of the Ka'bah as the Secret of the Spiritual Life', contains this description of 'qualitative space':

... spaces which are measured by inner states presuppose, essentially, a qualitative or discontinuous space of which each inner state is itself the measure, as opposed to a space which is quantitative, continuous, homogeneous, and measurable in constant measures. Such a space is an existential space, whose relationship to physico-mathematical space is analogous to the relationship of existential time to the historical time of chronology.

(p. 187)

It seems to me (in my admitted dilettantism) that a meditation on the Uncertainty Principle or Bell's Theorem might have produced the precise same paragraph.

Here, making use of the 17th century Shiite gnostic Qadi Sa'id Qummi, Corbin produces a hermeneutic of space (not without parallel in Bachelard's poetics of space) in its way as rigorous as any topology-mathematics – a specific architecture of the Borderland between visible and invisible: spiritual food not only for mad scientists but for all artists. 'It is in the *malakūt* [the Soul-plane]

that the essential work of man is accomplished, for the phenomenon of the world, as man reveals it to himself, depends above all and in the final analysis on the vision he has of his own *malakūt*. One can only act upon the external form assumed by the phenomenon of the world by acting upon the inner form or *malakūt* and such action is only possible where there is an affinity of ardent desire.

(pp. 261–2)

The last fifth of *Temple and Contemplation* consists of 'The *Imago Templi* in Confrontation with Secular Norms'. The Templars, the Temple of Jerusalem, its destruction and the millennial expectations of its reappearance, Ezekiel, Qumran, Philo, Eckhart, Fludd, Swedenborg, Masonry, the Grail – even Balzac and Solzhenitsyn! – here Corbin's Orient rejoins Corbin's Occident, the

Mysterious West . . . and here perhaps he comes closest to a description of his own particular path, which never diverged from an esoteric Christianity, 'the Church of John', Docetist, heretical and chivalric. Here – perhaps – is its manifesto:

No! the Temple is not destroyed forever. This was known to Suhravardī also, with whom we began this discussion and with whom it is right that we should end it. Suhravardī composed an entire 'Book of hours' in honour of the 'guardians of the Temple', who are unknown to the majority of men. They guard a secret Temple, and those who find their way to it can join in the invocation which returns, like a refrain, in one of the most beautiful psalms composed by Suhravardī: 'O God of every God! Make the litany of the Light arise. Make the people of Light triumphant. Guide the Light towards the Light. Amen.'

(p. 390)

Corbin the Traditionalist, enemy of all secular norms; Corbin the heretic, even spiritual anarchist – which is the 'real' Corbin? Like his mentor and guide Ibn 'Arabi, Corbin produced such a sea of thought that a great variety of souls may fish therein with profit. He reconciled and saw similarities where others see only contradiction (for example, between Gnostic Dualism and Radical Monism) – and this is a puissant definition of genius, is it not? And yet . . . he was no Prometheus, no Beethoven, no Heidegger – nor was he simply a scholar, a sifter of dust. Perhaps the term 'contemplative metascholarship' needs to be coined for him; in any case, the pen falters, mere labels seem obnoxious. A saint of the Imagination.

Peter Lamborn Wilson

## Yeats's Predestined Part

*Yeats the Initiate. Essays on certain themes in the writings of W. B. Yeats*, by Kathleen Raine, Dolmen Press, 1986, pp. 449, £35.

In at least one sense this book starts where it ends. That is to say the reader might well be advised to turn to the last chapter if he or she would like some advance indication as to the terms on which its author has here collected together the fruits of several decades of study and assimilation of Yeats's thought and art. In 'Yeats's Singing School', the most personal of these fourteen studies 'of certain themes' in Yeats, Kathleen Raine quite unequivocally nails her colours to the mast of the perennial wisdom. Thus she sails valiantly into the still hardly charted (at least by the 'Yeats industry') regions she amply demonstrates must be made in some sense familiar territory if the study of Yeats's work is to be pursued in terms of the same values as were those of the

poet himself. The author confesses that, 'after my work on Blake . . . I turned more and more to Yeats . . . not with the intention of making on Yeats a comparable study . . . I had no wish to pursue the Academic activity of source-hunting for its own sake . . . to Yeats I turned rather for my own secret purposes as a poet.' This confession gives us a clue as to the nature of these essays and how that affects our reading of them.

What we do not find is the neat unfolding of an academic thesis, the more or less clever literary analysis in pursuit of its quarry moving from poem, to line, to allusion, to metaphor, symbol, image and analogy in order to reveal, as much as anything of the poet, the agility and tenacity of the commentator's own powers. Not that such powers are absent, far from it, but they are here used for a different purpose. Throughout these pages Kathleen Raine touches upon the central core of Yeats's vision and the themes that informed his deepest thought. But not from the customary stance of 'objective assessment' so much as from having assimilated to an extraordinary degree the substance of Yeats's imaginative procedures. By virtue of her own poetic vocation Kathleen Raine must be considered the natural heir to Yeats, as Yeats was to Blake, in a line of descent that runs through Shelley and the Romantics, Samuel Palmer and 'the Ancients'. In these studies Yeats is certainly not 'explained' (whatever purpose that would serve). To read these pages is to enter into a process whereby the imaginative thought of Yeats is to a reasonable degree re-enacted. Only a thorough imaginative assimilation and identity with the spiritual values of Yeats's own thought could enable this to happen. It means also that these studies make considerable demands upon the reader who in no sense has his work done for him except in so far as he has the benefit of Dr Raine's consummate learning. This is not the point. To expect the uppermost regions of Yeats's vision to be reached without considerably more than a merely literary-aesthetic method is to come unprepared.

Of all modern poets Yeats is the one who most obviously demands to be understood in the light of what we may call 'tradition'. This fact is inescapable given the depth and range of Yeats's studies in religion, alchemy, symbolism, magic, psychical research and much more. Moreover, of all modern poets Yeats was most fully the poet of his time. His imaginative vision looks back to the death of European Christian civilisation and looks forward to the West's gradual embracing of Eastern doctrine – the acknowledgement from deep within its psyche that, as Kathleen Raine puts it, 'not matter, but mind is the ground of reality as we experience it'. Yeats's poetry can be said to articulate in a syncretistic vision the inherent problems that arise from the modern West's loss of its own spiritual tradition in the face of its having to acknowledge the claims of other traditions. (In defence of Yeats's imaginative procedures Dr Raine remarks, 'Syncretism may be bad for theology but it is indispensable to poetry.') The characteristic richness and suggestiveness of Yeats's poetry and drama comes from its implicit acknowledgement of fresh possibilities of



self-renewal outside the canon of Christian art and theology, not to mention the areas of knowledge totally banished by the rationalistic doctrine of Western Catholicism and the naïve materialism of the modern scientific mentality. If Yeats felt free (not casually, it should be stressed, but as the result of spiritual searching such as liberal humanism is rarely likely to encounter in the study of 'comparative religions') to accept and reject aspects of the religious traditions he studied in pursuit of what he called Unity of Being he thus reflects the contemporary pluralistic view of those traditions which, according to contemporary conditions, have now lost something of their autonomous identity as paths to the Spirit.

By comparison with Yeats's, Eliot's poetry has a certain aridity from its being a poetry of, so to say, spiritual exhaustion. In Eliot's nostalgia for a lost metaphysical order there is no glimpse, as there is in Yeats, of the inauguration of a new age where may,

From marble of a broken sepulchre,  
Or dark betwixt the polecat and the owl,  
Or any rich, dark nothing disinter  
The workman, noble and saint, and all things run  
On that unfashionable gyre again.

What constitutes this 'unfashionable gyre' is the context in which Kathleen Raine, in these studies, views the various and central themes of Yeats's work. So thorough is her demonstration of the necessity of moving outside and beyond the frontiers of knowledge so often taken as prescriptive by Yeats's commentators – where, for instance the symbols Yeats uses for the purpose of penetrating the surface of reality are reduced to mere literary counters deployed more or less for no other reason than that of aesthetic effect – that one is left wondering why it is not yet accepted as common sense that in order to grasp the nature of Yeats's endeavour the reader must at least acquaint himself with some knowledge of magic, Cabbala, neo-Platonism, Vedanta, etc. As the author points out, 'nothing could be more mistaken than to suppose that Yeats ever used words for the mere beauty of the language'. The many years of Yeats's arduous study were nothing if not a recognition that the spiritual unanimity of the art of countless people in all ages is in all likelihood something more than a coincidental folly: '... how trust historian and psychologist that have for some three hundred years ignored in writing the history of the world, or of the human mind, so momentous a part of human experience', the poet wrote in *Autobiographies*. He, as it were, took the logical step, yet guided by a profound intuition, of asking himself what in essence the world's spiritual wisdom compelled him to acknowledge. In his last letter he wrote, 'It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I tried to put all into a phrase I say, "man can embody truth but he cannot know it".'

In a study of Yeats's magical practises in connection with his use of the Tarot



and his membership of the Order of the Golden Dawn, Dr Raine observes, 'For Yeats magic was not so much a kind of poetry, as poetry a kind of magic, and the object of both alike was evocation of energies and knowledge from beyond consciousness of the empirical ego'. (Elsewhere, the author points out that, 'For Yeats the theatre was above all an instrument for creating and raising the national consciousness'. Poetry and theatre were thus, as it were, respectively the esoteric and exoteric dimensions of Yeats's imagination.) This observation should be inscribed at the beginning of any study of Yeats's work for it points to the *raison d'être* of so much of what Yeats attempted, especially in his greatest poetry. It is only in the light of this attempt to shift the boundary of waking consciousness in order to move beyond the reductionist confines of the ego that the poet's assimilation of what would otherwise remain disparate areas of study makes sense. That his prolonged studies in areas of knowledge that embraced levels and modes of experience – especially in the realms of magic and mediumship – whose value seems at times less than worthy of his later powers of discernment – is beside the point. We are not asked by the author necessarily to agree as to the ultimate value of much of these occult activities. What we are invited to understand is their necessity to Yeats at a certain stage of his life as an instrument to lever the carapaced surface of his conscious hold upon reality. In order to achieve what he had set out to do Yeats was forced to make his own path from the seemingly heterogeneous elements of his wide studies. In a study entitled 'Hades Wrapped in Cloud' the author touches with wise sensitivity upon the problems involved in Yeats's investigations into the regions beneath everyday consciousness. Here Dr Raine shows that Yeats was himself well aware of the dangers of his psychical activities especially in his communication with the Spirits through the mediumship of his wife – who had warned him, 'Remember we will deceive you if we can'. In 'The Phases of the Moon' and, as if to remind himself of the ancient prohibition against delving into the chaotic regions of the subconscious, Yeats quotes the Chaldean Oracle: 'Stoop not down to the darkly splendid world wherein continually lieth a faithless depth and Hades wrapped in cloud, delighting in unintelligible images.' And with characteristic ambivalence he wrote in *A Vision*: 'In partly accepting and partly rejecting that explanation . . . , in affirming a Communion of the Living and the Dead, I remember that Swendenborg has described all those between the celestial state and death as plastic, fantastic and deceitful, the *dramatis personae* of our dreams; that Cornelius Agrippa attributes to Orpheus these words: The Gates of Pluto must not be unlocked, within is a people of dreams'. As Dr Raine states, 'the matter of Yeats's thought is of so unfamiliar a nature that we may easily fail to understand him. He himself is tentative in his conclusions'.

It is in turn a characteristic property of these studies that they do not attempt the sort of assessment that suggests their author has hold of some infallible principle by which to pass judgement upon each and every aspect of Yeats's

spiritual and artistic development. Rather, their allusive subtlety more often than not re-creates the rich patterns of Yeats's imaginative thought. By not seeking to exclude any area of the poet's esoteric interest, and ranging freely from supraconscious to subconscious levels of reference, the author makes herself an indispensable guide in the manner of a long familiar inhabitant of Yeats's poetic world.

Given, then, that for Yeats poetry was a form of magic in the battle to re-make himself, part of the struggle towards attaining Unity of Being, these studies show that the most recurring, if often only implicit theme, of Yeats's work is that the work of man is to achieve through the power of art that merging of individual identity – as taught by the mystics of all ages – in the greater Self. So many of Yeats's poems are in essence permutations of this self-transmutation in figurative language. What these studies reveal is the ever developing and dynamic dialectic, so to say, of Yeats's concept of Unity of Being and how this contributes to the Unique linguistic and metaphoric richness of the poetic texture of his work.

In a chapter entitled 'Yeats and the Creed of St Patrick', Dr Raine answers the question, where did Yeats stand in relation to Christianity? This she does with just the right combination of sensitive scholarship and imaginative learning so that the poet himself, one suspects, might well have approved. It is foolish to the point of absurdity to try and understand Yeats as other than a voice against the naïve materialism and atheist humanism that has overwhelmed art and society in recent centuries. While fully allowing for the ramifications of Yeats's ambivalence towards doctrinal spirituality the author points out that it was Yeats's 'predestined part' to resituate 'Christianity within the context of the Perennial Philosophy as a whole'. But this process must be understood against the poet's necessity to build from disparate sources the symbolic and mythological substance of his imaginative discourse. In antiquity, Dr Raine writes, 'No poet invented his own myth: and Yeats, living as Blake had already lived, in a society which has, as a whole, broken with tradition, knew how impossible it was to build up, from a series of intuitive flashes, that wholeness of context which great poetry requires'.

Nonetheless, viewing his work as a whole and in retrospect it must be conceded that, as Dr Raine writes in another chapter, 'As he grew older and more learned in traditional knowledge Yeats moved from a predominantly experimental to an increasing metaphysical approach to "the Beyond" from the techniques of magic, the collecting of folk lore, and, after *A Vision*, even from mediumship, to the Platonic philosophers and above all Plotinus. Yet there is no abandonment of the earlier beliefs but an entirely consistent development. It is natural that experiment should have preceded metaphysics; and doubtless Yeats came to Plotinus because in him more than in any other philosopher he discovered a cosmology, a metaphysics, consistent with the soul's history as he had come to understand it.' It is to be regretted that the author, in revising this

essay for the present book, did not include Yeats's study of Vedanta as the final dimension of his study of the 'Soul's history'.

Yeats's greatest gift was for the alchemy of language. The studies that comprise *Yeats the Initiate* brilliantly testify to the fact that this alchemy operated far beyond merely aesthetic or literary levels of reference. In Yeats's poetry we come as near to perfection as has proved possible in this century to wedding the highest metaphysical truths to simple images drawn from sensible reality. That to achieve this Yeats had to breach the integral language of several traditional worlds cannot be gainsaid. And this he did at a time in the West's history when it has often seemed that, as Dr Raine writes, 'A metaphysical syncretism based upon the universal tradition of the Perennial Philosophy seems already not more but less obscure than the language of Christian theology.' This may beg many metaphysical questions but can there be any doubt that the value of Yeats's work will be diminished to the extent our understanding of it seeks to ignore or falsify this situation, as the pages of *Yeats the Initiate* triumphantly demonstrate.

Brian Keeble

## Authentic Words

Edward Johnston, *Lessons in Formal Handwriting*. ed. by Heather Child and Justin Howes, Lund Humphries, 1986. pp. 243. £29.50.

*Contemporary Calligraphy: Modern Scribes and Lettering Artists II*. Trefoil Books, 1986, pp. 168 (280 black and white and 26 colour illustrations). £14.95.

Nicolette Gray, *A History of Lettering*, Phaidon, 1986, pp. 256 (300 illustrations) £17.95.

Their ubiquitous appearance in so many modes and shapes surrounding us, indeed, immersing us, might be said to qualify our age as the age of the word as image. We live in words. Not only are they common coins of communication but in their depths are hidden the delicate impulses of our hopes, our thoughts, our aspirations, even our betrayals. How often are we as good as our word? That most tenuous of all links, our hold upon truth, is most often effected through the agency of words. It is just this all-pervasiveness, however, the sheer quantity of words that the modern world forces upon us, the flow of them passing through our lives and minds that makes it that much more difficult to savour their deepest significance, at the level at which they actually take effect in our lives. Words have become, like all else, a mere commodity passed from hand to hand, eye to eye, with no awakening in us of their burden. Yet against all odds, it would seem, in the contemporary world, there have been a few

occasions when something of the sacred quality of words and writing has been incarnated – some physical and formal manifestation that has the ability to arrest the impermanence of words which

Crack and sometimes break, strain, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still.

The formal penmanship of Edward Johnston was one such occasion. It was Johnston who more or less singlehandedly re-discovered the art of calligraphy for the modern west. In a long and arduous labour beginning just before the turn of the century, studying manuscripts in the British Museum, Johnston pioneered the re-use of the broad-edged pen – a skill that had been more or less lost for several centuries. Even the slightest acquaintance with this 'visionary' craftsman makes it apparent that his life and work had that kind of integrity which is the very opposite of what has become the operative norm of workmanship in modern society. When we look back upon his achievement and make some attempt at assessment we do him an injustice – amounting to a sin of omission – if we do not acknowledge that that achievement was gained at the price of having to move against the grain of his times. Johnston was, if we consider him from the point of view of the inherent philosophy of his craft, a man of the Middle Ages. There he would have been a 'normal' man instead of being what he was, very much the exception.

For Johnston nothing was 'dead' matter: all is instinct with the life of the spirit. Handling the materials of his trade he was like a Shaman involved in the preparation of a ritual to call down the power of the Infinite into the act of forming letters. He spoke of spending forty hours in scraping and preparing a skin of vellum. Irene Wellington reports: 'His aim was the perfection of all tools, and he regarded the writing surface as a tool as much as a pen'. To complement this attention to minute detail he gives evidence elsewhere of the breadth of his vision by reporting that he thought the functions of the elements of Harmony and Contrast in formal lettermaking as akin to bringing together Heaven and Earth.

From the rigour and consistency of his thought and practice he concluded that it was only when truth is served that beauty will result. And truth is not served directly by artistic or aesthetic performance so much as in the authentic effort of making. (He early ignored the blandishments of Art Nouveau.) Johnston repudiated the idea that he was an artist; 'Study your dictionaries,' he advised, '... look up the word "Authentes" (Greek), one who does things himself, first hand, opposite to copied, actual, genuine, opposite to pretend, really proceeding from its reputed source or author.' This is the very opposite of working purely on the basis of individual expression. The man who makes authentic things as if on the basis of his own authority is one who has fully

realised the perfection of his art – this implies a knowledge and skill at determining the whole context by which something is called forth to fit a human need. It is not the demonstration of an isolated skill. Irene Wellington speaks of Johnston looking upon skill almost as temptation, something to be deliberately controlled or even purged from one's work. The intimate, organic even, relationship between skill and truth is absolute and fundamental to his life and work.

In 1934 Johnston, as president of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, wrote to *The Times*: 'Without the craftsman there can be no design in that sense of the word which connotes aesthetic value. In this connection the engineer may be regarded as a craftsman, and the aesthetic value of his work is likely to be in proportion to its fitness for purpose. Unless the design arises out of the actual construction of a thing it is reduced to the level of extraneous ornamentation. Design, in fact, is inherent rather than applied, and the "application of design" to mechanical processes suggests an attempt to get the best of both worlds by trying to secure the appearance of craftsmanship without its substance!' The question is then, what is the substance of craftsmanship? In pointing out that design is inherent rather than applied Johnston acknowledged the need, in the making of anything, for the maker to be wholly engaged in the process of making from conception to finished product. And if this engagement is thwarted for whatever reason then there takes place a betrayal of what it is man's nature to be.

This may seem a long way from the context of Calligraphy and formal penmanship with which we usually associate Johnston. But is it really so? If he is to be accepted as a sort of father figure of the contemporary resurgent calligraphic movement it is because of the value of those principles and methods he instituted as a result of his solitary researches among the manuscripts at the British Museum. He was all of a piece and we have to accept that acquiring these principles and developing his method were part and parcel of accepting a way of working that is fundamentally opposed to what is considered as standard today.

So it is not only a question of learning from Johnston how to make 'living letters with a formal pen', but of first understanding how we might once again savour something of the sacred task of embodying words in formal shapes and tangible materials. If, as the editors of *Lessons in Formal Penmanship* acknowledge, Johnston 'remains fundamentally relevant to our needs today' then it must be for greater reasons than a simple aesthetic adventure among letter forms. Our needs today must be interpreted in the broadest possible terms, beginning with the three questions that Johnston felt should precede the making of not only 'living letters' but all things made that are fit for men to see and use: 'What is the thing? How is it done? Why should it be done?' All of which presupposes that it is man who asks such questions and that we should have an understanding of his nature. (Johnston thought of man as being God's consciousness.) By asking

these three questions the lettering artist is forced from the outset to recognise the wider context of meaning beyond his particular practical skill.

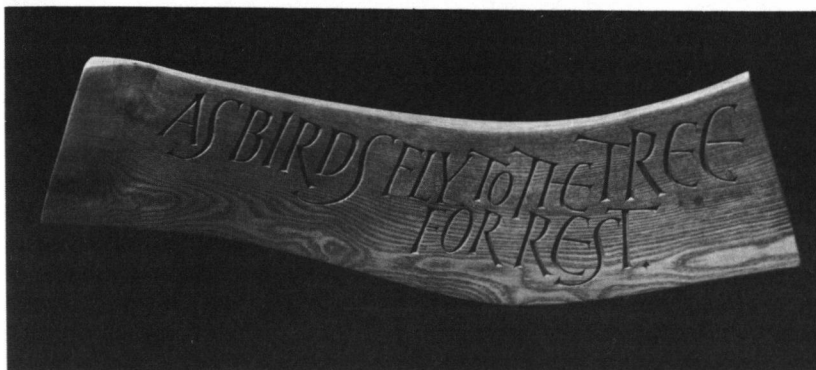
*Lessons in Formal Writing* collects together many articles by Johnston that have either been out of print or were previously unpublished as well as many tributes to him by those who knew him and studied with him. There are many examples of his mainly earlier work reproduced. The volume is the successor to *Formal Penmanship* (1971)..

His is still a living presence among scribes and those concerned with the business of making good letter forms. The present volume is essential reading and study material, albeit it is something of a patchwork quilt of excerpts and contributions. Among them its most important contents are the transcriptions of his lectures on Formal Writing given at the Royal College of Art in London in 1930–31. By all accounts Johnston's lectures were capable of working a certain magic upon those who were prepared by ear and hand to appreciate their contents. Although the magic can hardly be expected to come across from these transcripts nonetheless they are the nearest a scribe may come to having a lesson from the master. It is a great pity that the publishers did not see fit to reproduce in a larger format the actual blackboard demonstrations that accompany the lectures. By following the transcript with reference to the demonstration one can gain a sense of what it must have been like to actually see these 'living letters' being formed from the author's hand.

The editor's introduction contains a quotation of James Hayes: 'The practice of calligraphy now seems to be splitting into two parts: the traditional or "scribal" way which is primarily concerned with formal legible letters, and the "calligraphic" way which is more graphic and stylistic, and more concerned with personal self-expression.' Even if one could easily find fault with such an artificial and arbitrary division, it does pinpoint the dilemma of the contemporary lettering artist as many of them view it. In an age of aesthetic mediocrity such as ours it is natural enough to see the need to revitalize letter forms. The decay of a sense of the sacred importance of words goes hand-in-hand with a weakening grasp of the essentially metaphysical nature of language. If we are to be consistent in our appreciation of Johnston we have to accept him whole and acknowledge that his values have little meaning when isolated from, at the very least, the possibility of regarding the act of writing as a sacred art. If Johnston's influence is to be authentic it should serve to show the need to balance the demand for revitalized letter forms against the more vacuous temptations that are inherent in the diminishing returns of 'self-expression'.

The dangers are evident in some of the work contributed to *Contemporary Calligraphy* where the aesthetic dimension of letter forms is exploited as if it had some absolute value in its own right apart from any other consideration. What results is a sort of personal therapy rather than a revitalisation. When letters are released from their obligation to form words, and words loose their bond with meanings – however 'vital', 'creative', 'experimental', or 'original' (all qualities





Martin Wenham, 'Toccata 22'

Text from *The Ten Principal Upanishads* translated by Shree Purohit Swami and W. B. Yeats. Reproduced by permission of Faber and Faber. The complete text reads, 'My Son! All things fly to the Self, as birds to the tree for rest'. English ash branch-wood, cleft and shaped. 68mm long. (From *Modern Scribes and Lettering Artists II*)

that have to be harnessed to some end, and be reconciled to some purpose before they can have value for the intelligence) – can they ever be more than an empty exercise of virtuosity? To pretend that such exercises, at their best, become 'art forms' (as does the editor Peter Halliday), is merely to beg the question as to what 'art' is. In appreciating and valuing the aesthetic qualities of letter-forms we have to guard against seeing our pleasure in their abstract qualities as self-justifying. We can test the validity of this claim by transposing non-sense for proper text. Has something been lost? Where does the impulse to make letters come from ultimately but from *meaning*. The life-line that always links letters to their archetypes is always the need to communicate *meaning*. Letters have been in the past objects of contemplation. Nicolette Gray in her *A History of Lettering* quotes Peter Brown speaking of *The Book of Kells*, the *Book of Durrow* and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*: 'the northern contemplative did not gaze eye to eye into the face of an icon, like his Byzantine contemporaries. It was in the pages of the Gospels that he hoped to find his God; he crouched in rapt attention over an open page.'

It is heartening indeed, on the evidence of this anthology, that there is a growing band of dedicated craftsmen and women to whom the written word means more than to be just one more consumer item. So rich is the fare that it has the effect of reminding us just how seldom in public and private places we see well executed letters from the hands of a master. How many are the

opportunities, from bus tickets to buildings, but how rarely seized. The impoverishment of our environment goes on, helped by the position of unimportance that lettering and calligraphy is accorded in our art colleges. The publishers of this well presented collection are to be congratulated for demonstrating their continuing faith in the ability of today's lettering masters who, even after several centuries of established precedent can still effectively demonstrate that the possibilities of beautiful communication with the twenty-six letters of the alphabet have not yet been exhausted.

Nicolete Gray's *History* is of the roman letters, 'the way in which they are written; and so with their visual form'. In a magnificent choice of over 300 plates the author illustrates her thesis that 'the history of lettering can be seen as the repeated revival of the Roman letter'. Indeed the harmony and proportion of the Roman square capital alphabet constitutes the visual archetype for the West. All attempts to revitalise letter forms tend to begin with a 'call to order' by going back to these classic shapes. But the visual archetype is not the Archetype, which remains unmanifest in the mind – the Platonic form or idea of the perfect letter. Nicolete Gray hints at this fact when she rightly acknowledges that it is the eye, and not geometry (the relationship of the Roman letter to the square and the circle) that is the final arbiter in establishing the correct form of a letter. Geometric principles arrive only at the approximate in this respect. It is this 'hidden', archetypal form that Nicolete Gray calls an *identity* (rather than a shape) that exists in the mind. If there were no such archetype there would be no searching for the 'perfect letter'. Contemplation and letter-form meet in this archetypal identity. Moreover, it is a living relationship as Johnston's work demonstrated again and again, a process of continuing reassessment of our relationship to the sacred. Surely this is the purpose of those innumerable masterpieces of medieval calligraphy. The evolution of the roman alphabet, as revealed in these plates, is clear. The sacred significance of the written word takes precedence. At the Renaissance letters begin to lose their sacred significance to become the day-to-day counters of secular trade and communication. Can we not see Johnston's 'traditionalism' as an attempt to arrest this decay?

By the seventeenth century, what for the Italian writing masters had been cultured exuberance, had become the 'play' of copperplate. By the nineteenth century letters are made to express the characteristics of secular humanism: they become, 'fussy', 'jovial', 'brutal', 'fat-face', 'flippant', 'picturesque', 'elegant'. Medieval letter-forms are objective by comparison and one looks in vain to the scribe's work for some reflection of passing fashion. The true scribe seeks to fix a fluid relationship (between Idea and expression) with a momentary intensity that eludes the passage of time. Many of the most beautiful examples in *Contemporary Calligraphy* are evidence of this need – in an age of meaningless haste – to find the meaningful stasis of eternity. The most



successful are noticeable for their rejection of the limited means at the disposal of 'self expression'. No true life is sustained in mere novelty. The innovator is he who returns to principles – the Roman exemplars. Compared with the sans-serif letters of Johnston and Gill (still very much alive and with us, and based on skeletal classic roman forms) the alphabets invented by Tschichold, Renner and Bayer to satisfy rational demands seem merely to come from off the 'top of the head'. They have, as it were, no depth of life – cannot sustain contemplation. The advent of the modern scribe's art seems to have come about, it can plausibly be argued, to satisfy at the deepest level a specific need: that a sacred significance should be assigned and contemplated in living letters.

In at least one sense Nicolette Gray's magnificent anthology charts the waxing and waning of this idea from the beginning of the roman alphabet to the present day. *A History of Lettering* comes as a welcome restorative against the currents of decay at work in contemporary letter forms.

Brian Keeble

## Rilke's Greatness

*A Ringing Glass: The Life of Rainer Maria Rilke* by Donald Prater. Oxford University Press, £25.

If there is a shortage of biographies of Rilke in English, then Donald Prater's sympathetic study of the interplay between Rilke's life and work more than compensates for the deficit of biographical material that has previously been available to the English reader.

Rilke's greatness as a poet who spans the era between the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, is comparable in stature only to the achievements of Eliot and Yeats. And of the three poets he is the most inaccessible, and perhaps for that reason the most compelling in his making 'things out of fear', his externalizing his intrinsic torment in that unification of exchange whereby inner and outer fuse in their correlative symbols.

In an age in which it has become customary to consider the poet as disinherited from a vocation, and as safer employed by the media, Rilke's insistence on his life being inseparable from his art, his letters, a sounding out of the ideas that infused his poetry, and his solitudes an intense listening for the decisive voice, so single-minded a focus must appear anomalous, but it is nevertheless only through sacrifice, the exploration of one's inner hells and triumphs, and a devotion to one's craft that great poetry comes to be written.

Rilke himself was to discover 'what enormous effort this art demands, how even an undivided, concentrated strength directed solely to this one aim often seems inadequate.'

The struggle of Rilke's life exemplifies the criterion that Yeats had drawn up between the man of action and imagination, the man of direct involvement in experience as opposed to the poet's reflective and sedentary task. Irreconcilables are very much the province of the poet, and the tension created between arrested action on the one hand and dynamic imaginative involvement on the other, engenders the friction necessary to creative energy. Rilke's life and his art early on came into conflict when he imprudently formed a youthful marriage with Clara Westhoff in 1901, an action which led almost immediately to separation in the interests of what the poet saw as a greater gain to their mutually respective arts. Of this early stumbling-block, Donald Prater perceives that 'Marriage, which had seemed "a necessity", had very quickly laid bare a problem that would remain with him throughout his life in all his relationships with women and with the outside world: the irreconcilable conflict between "the great work" and a normal existence.'

Rilke's life was in most ways a coming to terms with fear – he avoided Freudian psychoanalysis no matter the insistence of Lou Andreas-Salomé that he should go through with it, and recognised instead that his fears were the material for his work, they were the still inchoate matter in the nigredo that would in time be transmuted into the alchemical substance of poetry. Of this process Rilke wrote, 'I creep around the whole day in the thickets of my life and cry out like a savage and clap my hands, you won't believe what hair-raising creatures fly out.' Rilke's almost pathological introspection gave rise to that supreme inventory of his fears – *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*, the fragmentary autobiographical novel in which the angst of the twentieth century is touched on in the way that opening an attic curtain we may unsuspectingly flush out the bumbling irascible drone of an autumn wasp. There is a remarkable passage on fear in Rilke's novel that includes the very real terror that 'if I fell asleep I might swallow the piece of coal lying in front of the stove; the fear that some numeral may begin to grow in my brain until there is no more room for it within me; the fear that it may be granite I am lying on, grey granite; the fear that I may shout, and that people may gather at my door and finally break it open; the fear that I may betray myself and tell all that I dread; and the fear that I might not be able to say anything, because everything is beyond utterance; and the other fears . . . the fears.'

If poets are as Pound would have it, 'the antennae' of the species, or as Shelley expressed it 'the unacknowledged legislators of the universe', then they are also the most sensitive of instruments for recording the mental climate of the age in which they live. Rilke's neuroses corresponded on an external level to the breaking up of the civilized world in which he lived, a phenomenon that was to culminate in the cataclysm of the 1914–18 war and the death of the old

Europe which had generously patronized its poets and artists; Rilke himself receiving continued support and financial advice from his publishers the Insel Verlag and from a circle of friends which included Princess Marie von Thurn und Taxis.

Rilke's life and work describes an arc; his restlessness, his incessant travels, his need to insulate himself with a quiet in which the voice of the god could not be mistaken, took on the form of an inner and outer journey: it was as though he was forever travelling in search of the voice that eluded him. Right from the inception of the *Duino Elegies* on that windy day in January 1911, the voice out of the bora calling – 'And if I cried, who'd listen to me in those angelic orders?' – Rilke lived in a state of tormented frustration at the inconclusion of what he had come to recognise as his great work. He was to have to wait another decade before the work saw completion, and the whirlwind of creativity again encompassed him. He travelled across the face of Europe in search of his poem, trying for a deeper and deeper solitude in which the union with the angel could be re-established. The inner search drove him to distraction, 'trying to terrify things by aiming at them point-blank, this pistol loaded with expectation.'

Readers of Rilke who know his *Letters to a Young Poet* and his correspondence in general, will be familiar with his sympathy for all those who concerned themselves with elucidating their inner lives; a task that involves humility; and wasn't it Rilke who wrote in the *Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* that 'One ought to wait and gather sense and sweetness a whole life long, and a long life if possible, and then, quite at the end, one might perhaps be able to write ten good lines. For verses are not, as people imagine, simply feelings, (we have these soon enough); they are experiences. In order to write a single verse, one must see many cities, and men and things; one must get to know animals and the flight of birds, and the gestures that the little flowers make when they open out in the morning.'

For Rilke, who was always beginning, and no matter how euphonic his early poems may have been, they promise none of the fully realized power and originality of observation that were to characterize the *New Poems* of 1907–08, each phase of his life as it was presented to him, was accepted as a source of wonder from which to create. He wrote 'for' life and not against it, celebrating its beauty, elegizing its losses, but always seeking to rise above his material, in the way that the transcendent imagination redeems by casting light into the darkest recess. And the poet must look into the dark, he must confront it intrepidly as a man staring into the eyes of a tiger, arresting its leap by the mesmeric concentration of his psychic energy. There are no half commitments to poetry; the vocational demands of the latter are unconditional: it is your life or nothing. 'I am in work like the kernel in the fruit' was Rilke's declaration. He saw even sickness, and he was often plagued by ill health and periods of psychophysical exhaustion which intimated the eventual leukaemia from

which he was to die, as an inseparable part of his work – the two were somehow interdependent: 'For I no longer have any doubt about it, I am sick, my sickness has greatly increased and lies also in what I've hitherto called my work, so that there's no refuge there . . .' And even more perceptive is his realisation that 'I can't fathom whether the trouble is of the body or the mind: for I fear I actually do have a hole where the two sides of existence should be exactly in contact.' And rightly, if painfully so, for the poet alone possesses a border pass permitting him to cross from the visible to the invisible, a voyage he performs with the facility of one who has long been a citizen of both states. Nor is it the other side that presents the problems; the poet's dilemma is a temporal one, for he is least accepted on the earth-side of the boundary.

Like Yeats, Rilke's life was singularly devoted to his art. There are poets in every generation who are called upon to choose between the irreconcilable conflict of life and work, and Rilke somehow managed to conjugate the two, although it is always the human aspect which suffers at the expense of the suprahuman calling. And Donald Prater, with the art of the good biographer, unobtrusively charts this peripatetic life, from the poet's early travels to Russia accompanied by Lou Andreas-Salomé, to his years in Paris where he was for a time, secretary to Rodin, his journeys to Egypt, Scandinavia and Spain, the war years in Munich, and his final period of reclusion in the chateau at Muzot in Switzerland, where in 1921, in a feverish period of six weeks' constant creativity he was to complete the *Duino Elegies* and write all of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*.

When Rilke died in 1926, he had completed his task, but once again it was the human who was denied the continuity of a life which would have been perhaps the richer, now that his great work lay behind him. It was a transitional period; he had begun to write poems in French, and published a small collection *Vergers*, and the retreat at Muzot which had served him well as a vessel in which to await the storm of creation, had ceased to symbolize that period of waiting, and the unbroken solitude was beginning to tell on his nerves. We can't predict how Rilke would have reacted to old age, nor what later fruits might have come to him, and Donald Prater wisely avoids this issue, presenting us rightly with the substance of the poet's life. And of death Rilke had written: 'As rest is not just a cessation of movement . . . so Death is not a lessening or loss of life; to me, it seems certain that for us this singular name signifies life as a whole, the completeness of life, all life in one.'

Donald Prater is to be much commended for the diligence of his research, the extensive quotation from hitherto unpublished letters that he has made available to us, and for being the perfect biographer, who like the photographer remains out of the picture, and presents us with his subject matter. The publication of this excellent biography also pleads a case for the reprinting of Nora Wydenbruck's *Rilke Man and Poet*, the one other meritorious biography of Rilke in English, and published by John Lehmann in 1949.

Jeremy Reed

## Poems from Ancient China

*The Songs of the South*: an ancient Chinese anthology of poems by Qu Yuan and other poets translated, annotated and introduced by David Hawkes, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985.

Nearly thirty years ago David Hawkes published his translations of the poems known as the *Chu ci*, or *Songs of the South*. These were composed at varying times between c.300 BC and AD 200; they owed their origin to practices that were of fundamental importance in China's ancient religion but which suffered criticism or proscription as the land and its people became more and more subject to the leadership and control of literate and educated officials. The style and contents of the poems are varied; they range from the riddles that seek to penetrate universal truths to the rapturous union of men and nature; from the agonised search for unsullied integrity to the shamans' invocations to the gods, or a lament for those fallen in battle. The task that faced the young scholar – whom the present David Hawkes claims that he would hardly recognise – was formidable.

The language and vocabulary of the poems sometimes stems from a dialect that was never accepted as a literary norm; there are allusions to mythology and ritual practices whose details were deliberately suppressed by later generations; and much that is now known of the social, intellectual and religious life of central or southern China still awaited discovery at the hands of scholar or archaeologist. It is a mark of the quality of David Hawkes' original work (1959) that after three decades of scholastic achievement he is willing to re-issue his translation of the poems with little change. For good measure he has provided completely new introductions both to the collection as a whole and to each individual poem, and these take full account of recent research. Both here and in the annotation the reader will find the necessary guidance to take him through the technical problems of the text.

China's imperial era, which came to a close at the beginning of this century, lasted for some 2000 years. The period had witnessed the establishment of a social, political and intellectual tradition that rested on a faith in the ethical teachings of Confucius (551–479) and a respect for some of China's earliest literature. It was hoped that by fastening on these creations of man it would be possible to train officials to govern the land and its people in justice; that social stability would preclude outbreaks of discord; and that acts of human kindness would replace the brutish behaviour that had characterised early man. Those educated men who became China's civil servants were thus nurtured on a heritage of human values, and they were in duty bound to cherish the literature and arts in which those values were enshrined. They had been trained to acquire a familiarity with a canon of writings that included an ancient set of

poems known as the *Book of Songs*; in time they would themselves face examinations that included the composition of poetry in specified forms.

The *Book of Songs* includes some 300 poems, of which the earliest date from the 9th and 8th centuries. Quite soon these poems had come to play a central part in the musical performances of religious and secular occasions; their authority – almost scriptural – was such that a great man of a kingdom could convince his king or his opponents of his own wisdom by deft use of a citation. This was because the call to nature's beauties or the erotic appeal of some of the songs lay open to allegorical interpretation and application to a contemporary issue of public life. Confucius himself, said to have assembled the collection, commended their use for this purpose, and some 400 years after his time they were incorporated as a 'set book' in the imperial examinations; they survived in that capacity for 2000 years.

In this way the poetry of the *Book of Songs* acquired a role in public life that sometimes obscured its original intensity and lyricism, and the collection acted as one of the mainstays of the social, literary and intellectual fabric of imperial China. But a completely different history and treatment affected the *Songs of the South*, whose composition postdated that of the *Book of Songs* by several centuries. While the *Book of Songs* lent itself as an instrument of public life, the *Songs of the South* escaped such a fate, or use as scriptural authority. Certainly the personal appeal of some of the poems elicited heartfelt responses from a number of distinguished writers or statesmen; and the somewhat difficult text has attracted scholastic interest and elucidation throughout the centuries. But the poems represent aspects of Chinese life and belief that the established authorities of the empire preferred to ignore or even to eliminate. They sprang from a religious fervour that could hardly accord with the imposition of standardised norms or conventional behaviour. They display a mystical search for truth and they derive from a romantic view of the world, rather than serve as a means of regulating mankind.

Chinese empires were centred in the northern part of the sub-continent; the *Songs of the South* are redolent of the climate, terrain and way of life that is associated with the Yangtze river valley. This cuts across the land, separating areas that the empire builders of the north and their trained officials regarded as wild and unassimilated to civilisation. The poems from this singularly beautiful part of the world survived attempts to impose religious, intellectual and cultural uniformity that gathered pace from about the start of the Christian era; they may be understood and appreciated only with a recognition of the mythology, imagery and iconography of the Yangtze valley. In the poems there persists a blend of history and myth, of religion and human aspirations; there is no strict division between sacred and profane, or between spiritual and temporal such as we are now accustomed to seeing in the west. We shall find elements in common between the themes of the poems, the few symbolic paintings that survive from their time and religious practices. Poems, paintings



and contemporary explanations of the cosmos call alike on the same mythology, whose strength, variety and richness is best seen in the poem 'Heavenly Questions' (pp. 122–51).

The poems of the *Chu ci* were written not only before China first achieved political unity (221 BC); they also predate the arrival and assimilation of Buddhism and the growth of Taoist religion. They likewise predate the standardisation and orthodoxy that the northern masters were imposing, and the few rationalist thinkers who were beginning to ask awkward questions about China's myths. The poets assumed a familiarity with some of the basic characteristics of Chinese religion, such as the trust in a number of deities, the search for guidance by way of oracles and divination, the specialists' claims to exorcise evil, attempts to prolong life on earth and a yearning for the life of immortal beings in another world. The poems refer only occasionally to the complementary figures of Yin and Yang and their cycles; above all they derive from shamanist practice and a faith in the shaman's powers.

As with all early Chinese works, so with the *Chu ci* problems of authorship and authenticity have troubled scholars and critics for centuries. Non-specialist readers have David Hawkes to thank for sorting out the facts, difficulties and the theories advanced to solve them; he has also produced a tentative solution of the stages whereby this anthology was drawn up and amplified.

It may be concluded that the present collection includes at least one poem for certain that may be attributed to Qu Yuan of the state of Chu, who died shortly before 300 BC; others may be identified as the work of his admirers and imitators of the following centuries.

The earliest poems of the collection may be divided into two types. One group is concerned with the functions of the shaman. Here the poems may include invocations used in his work; they draw on a mythology that seeks to explain the mysteries of the heavens and the workings of the cosmos; and they may be described as impersonal, oral and religious. Poems of the other type are highly personal, literary and secular. Here the poet's cry is that of the individual whose soul is in distress; who stands alone, despised and rejected of men, and bewildered by life's injustices. In these poems the poet seeks the help of the shaman to ease his own problems; he looks for consolation in a mystical approach to the universe and its secrets.

The literary history of these poems shows how the second type came to displace an earlier tradition, moulding early practices and rites to suit the specific need of the individual. The process deserves consideration in the context of other developments of these centuries, whereby the demands of the intellect came to take priority over the free lead of intuition, and whereby secular standardised procedures replaced rites that had been born of spontaneous religious urges. Such developments may be seen in the case of divination, where the visionary utterances of the seer were eventually reduced to the mechanical consultation of a catalogue or an almanac. Similarly the

primeval magical invocations for rain, which included the shaman's part, were supplanted by a formalised symbolical drama, which enacted the principles of an abstract theory of the universe. A comparable process may be seen in the change that overcame the status and credibility of the shaman himself or herself. Originally a person of great power in the land, whose advice was sought in all connections, the shaman found his place reduced to that of a specialist in a few particular skills, and his functions reserved for particular occasions only.

The shamans' methods were twofold. First, they would depict the stark horrors and dangers of the world to which the soul was evidently proceeding; then, by contrast, they would try to tempt the soul to return to this world with its glorious delights. The terrors of the unknown are expressed in terms which refer alike to geographical divisions of the universe and to the mythological creatures which inhabit them:

'O soul, come back! For the west holds many perils.  
The Moving Sands stretch on for a hundred leagues.  
You will be swept into the Thunder's Chasm, and dashed in pieces, unable to  
help yourself;  
And even should you chance to escape from that, beyond is the empty  
desert,  
And red ants as huge as elephants and wasps as big as gourds.  
The five grains do not grow there; dry stalks are the only food;  
And the earth there scorches men up; there is nowhere to look for water;  
And you will drift there for ever, with nowhere to go in that vastness.  
O soul, come back! Lest you bring on yourself perdition. [p. 225]

By contrast, the life of the flesh includes a haven of pleasures:

O soul, come back! Choice things are spread before you.  
Four kinds of wine have been subtly blended, not rasping to the throat:  
Clear, fragrant, ice-cool liquor, not for base men to drink;  
And white yeast has been mixed with must of Wu to make the clear Chu  
wine.  
O soul, come back and do not be afraid.  
Musicians from Dai, Qin, Zheng and Wei are ready with their pipes;  
They play the 'Jia Bian' of Fu Xi and the 'Lao Shang' of Chu.  
The singers chorus 'The Sunny Bank' to the music of Zhao flutes.  
O soul, come back and tune the mulberry zither! [p. 235]

But the shamans' efforts have been of no avail, and the body lies lifeless, bereft of its two spiritual elements, the *po* that gave it life and the *hun* that gave meaning to that life. There followed a number of devices, exercises and ceremonies to keep the *po* appeased and to prevent the evil that a re-incarnated spirit might wreak. Some of the steps were designed to render the body incorrupt, should it be required once again for habitation. But the measures



that are of immediate concern are those which sought to help the *hun*, and here the purpose was diametrically opposite to that of the shamans and their invocations. For these had been seen to fail, and the steps that were now taken were intended to escort the *hun* away from earth to its proper destination. This was conceived as a paradise of the east, set where the sun rises. It was best approached by way of a journey through a group of holy islands whose heads rose above the ocean and looked at first sight like vases. To waft the *hun* safely on a journey that was still beset by perils, a talisman was sometimes exhibited and finally buried with the deceased body, and we are fortunate to possess one excellently preserved example, of just such an object, reverently interred at one of the tombs of Ma-wang-wei in about 168 BC. This is a richly coloured painting, on silk, part of which is reproduced as the cover of *The Songs of the South*. The complete painting forms an allegory in which the soul (*hun*) of the deceased lady is depicted on her progress through various stages of the journey on which she is bound. She receives a draft of the elixir; she ascends through the storeys of a vase, i.e. that vase shaped island of the eastern seas, known to be inhabited by immortal beings and the purest of plants. Eventually she, or her *hun*, is admitted by fierce warders through the gates of paradise, a realm in which she takes her due place between the sun and the moon.

Some thousand years before the *Songs of the South* has been written, shamans were giving guidance to kings and helping them to order human affairs. With the passage of the centuries their role had been reduced, while that of the professional, literate officials had grown; and by the time of the Chu ci shamans had become but one of a number of groups of specialists or intermediaries on whose services men could call. However their functions were not entirely restricted to those of the expert whose powers could summon back the soul to the land of the living. Shamans were also employed as healers of the sick; or they could be set to intercede for rain to relieve a drought. At least one section of the *Songs of the South*, ('Nine Songs') may be identified as deriving from the religious ceremonies in which shamans were engaged, in this case to make a contact with their gods. Their appeals were accompanied by rich music and splendid dance, and some of the rites were intended to bring about the presence of the god or goddess, in the way that a lover cries out to his beloved for favours. Some may even have included a mime of wooing, as may be seen in the following examples:

We have bathed in orchid water and washed our hair with perfumes,  
And dressed ourselves like flowers in embroidered clothing.  
The god has halted, swaying, above us,  
Shining with a persistent radiance. [p. 103]

Or: The goddess comes not, she holds back shyly.  
Who keeps her delaying within the island,  
Lady of the lovely eyes and the winning smile?

Skimming the water in my cassia boat,  
 I bid the Yuan and Xiang still their waves  
 And the Great River make its stream flow softly.  
 I look for the goddess, but she does not come yet.  
 Of whom does she think as she plays her reed-pipes? [p. 106]

Or: The Child of God, descending the northern bank,  
 Turns on me her eyes that are stark with longing.  
 Gently the wind of autumn whispers;  
 On the waves of the Dong-ting lake the leaves are falling.

Over the white sedge I gaze out wildly;  
 For a tryst is made to meet my love this evening.  
 But why should the birds gather in the duckweed?  
 And what are the nets doing in the tree-tops? [p. 108]

With the imperial era the shamans became subject to the pressure of officials. Historical records for the second century AD include a number of references to the studied attempts that were made to eliminate the shamans and their influence from the countryside. For a popular trust in their powers would accord ill with those who wished to stamp out irrational and sometimes harmful practices, or to engender obedience to the conventions and rules of the Confucian ideal.

The characteristic theme that recurs in the more personal poems of the *Chu ci* is that of the man of public affairs serving a foolhardy monarch who misunderstands his motives and distrusts his integrity. The advice that the statesman tenders in all loyalty is rejected; he suffers banishment; he laments the failure to recognise the true worth of his intentions, and he opts for suicide. Such was the personal story of Qu Yuan, whose death may be put at around 315 BC, and whose poem *Li sao* ('On Encountering Trouble') stands at the head of the collection. The theme is handled in a variety of ways, both here and in other poems. There is the mystic, embarking on his 'Far-off Journey', who sings:

Grieved by the parlous state of this world's ways,  
 I wanted to float up and away from it.  
 But my powers were too weak to give me support:  
 What could I ride on to bear me upwards? [p. 193]

The journey takes the poet through the misery of those who have lost faith in their own motives. He embarks on the path of self-questioning and searches for the serenity that may be gained by detachment from this world. In his long journey he catches sight of the enduring qualities of spiritual purity. He tries celestial and magical means of rejecting all in favour of such values; he finds a master who tells him:

'The Way can only be received, it cannot be given.  
 Small, it has no content; great, it has no bounds.  
 Keep your soul from confusion, and it will come naturally.  
 By unifying essence, strengthen the spirit; preserve it inside you  
 in the midnight hour.  
 Await it in emptiness, before even Inaction.  
 All other things proceed from this: this is the Door of Power'.

With these words of encouragement, or warning, the poet sets out on his pilgrimage, finally reaching the stage where he 'Came to Purity, and entered the neighbourhood of the Great Beginning'.

Elsewhere the theme is handled somewhat differently (pp. 203f.). The poet consults a specialist in divination, to see if he can help him resolve his problems. Should he choose public service, with its inherent hypocrisies, at the cost of honour? Should he seek fame at the cost of compromising his own integrity? 'Is it better to run neck and neck with the swiftest, or to follow in the footsteps of a broken hack?' (p. 205). But Zhan Yin the diviner cannot help. He abandons his turtles' shells and his yarrow stalks as instruments that are not fit for such weighty considerations; and we are left with the poet agonising over his difficulties.

By the start of the Christian era, Qu Yuan had already achieved greater significance as the author of *Li sao* than as the successful adviser of one of the kings of pre-imperial China; and his work had attracted admirers and imitators. Later he was destined for greater fame, as the paragon of the statesman of integrity who refuses to fish in muddy waters to further his career (see 'The Fisherman', pp. 206-7). In the long centuries that have followed, his example has been constantly invoked by men of public affairs who believe that they have been wronged by their masters. Then we find that Qu Yuan has entered the realm of mythology.

Since ancient times ceremonies of sacrifice and prayers had taken place in honour of the gods of the Yangtze river, in the hope of ensuring a successful rice harvest. At a comparatively late date this was transformed into a rite in which Qu Yuan took a central part. We know this as the colourful Dragon Boat Festival, performed in central and south China on the fifth day of the fifth month. Even more recently the myth has been taken to greater lengths. In a play that was staged in 1942 to rally support for the effort in the Sino-Japanese war, Qu Yuan featured as the hero-patriot. In the early years of the People's Republic high school students were solemnly taught that Qu Yuan was the first of China's people's poets.

Fortunately it is possible to compare the poets' treatment of these themes with that of the authors of a set of essays (the *Huai nan zi*) completed by 139 BC in an attempt to give a philosophical explanation of the universe. In the *Songs of the South*, the shaman tries to dissuade the human soul from departure to the next

world by painting a picture of the blood-curdling dangers to be encountered on the way. In one famous passage the *Huai nan zi* sets out a series of stages by which ascent may be made from this world to the next; each one is more blessed and rewarding than the last, and eventually the traveller or pilgrim reaches the abode of god. Some of this imagery recurs in our poems, e.g. the *Li sao* (p. 73). Occasionally the poets of Chu refer to the all compelling forces of Yin and Yang, and in at least one instance (probably late) they mention some of the animal symbols of the four quarters of the universe, i.e. The Scarlet Bird, Green Dragon and White Tiger (p. 240). But such references are meagre and infrequent as compared with those of the *Huai nan zi*'s scheme of existence, that depends so often on the cycle of these two forces. The *Huai nan zi* also calls on some of the philosophical principles that are the very essence of Chinese thought but which are almost totally absent from mention in the *Songs of the South* – the idea of *tao*, and that of the eternal cycle of birth, death and rebirth; by these two are the affairs of heaven, earth and man regulated in harmony and balance.

Michael Loewe

## Traditionalists and Humanists

Claude Palisca: *Humanism in Italian Renaissance musical thought*, Yale University Press, 1986, £40.

Umberto Eco – *Art and beauty in the Middle Ages*, Yale, 1986, £6.95.

Edgar Wind – *Hume and the heroic portrait*, Oxford, 1986, £29.50.

The Italian Renaissance is familiar to most persons through the glories of the visual arts, and, too often, literature, philosophy and music are left to one side. In the age of mass media it is easier to portray Brunelleschi's dome than it is to communicate the worlds of Poliziano, Pico or Zarlino. This makes for a distorted view, because the Renaissance was a holistic stirring of the intellect. For a person of the period all the arts revolved around central propositions which gave the times their universality. That which Alberti achieved in his writings on architecture, painting and sculpture, Ficino achieved in philosophy and Gaffurio in music theory. Furthermore, the principles of music permeated the visual arts and inspired philosophical speculation and verses to be set to music. Music, based on the science of number, was considered to be the key for unlocking the laws of beauty, its qualitative sounds were understood to be at the heart of the universe and encapsulated in the dance of nature.

For renaissance man, the speculative and the practical were the two sides of the same coin.

The study of renaissance music theory not only clarifies the thought of the period, but also shows the sources from which Western classical music flows.

The 'golden age' of Platonic revival provided the following centuries with a vision of harmony as the expression of the creation which was to inspire polyphony, instrumentation and declamation in song. Opera was a late brain-child of the Renaissance. This is the tradition which gave form to the West's music and inspired composers even into the Twentieth century. A break came with the late Romantics who strove to use the affective power of harmony, sound and rhythm, purely to stimulate the emotional faculties, thus obscuring the metaphysical roots upon which rested the science of music.

Claude Palisca's monumental study is a major contribution towards reassessing our musical heritage. He has accomplished a task that has daunted many scholars though the sheer profusion of writers, treatises, ideas and theories. His study of original sources displays the rich panorama of Renaissance musical thought. The knowledge and thought set out in his book are difficult to come by and earn the gratitude of the reader.

Fourteen chapters patiently set out the teachings promulgated in the main cultural centres of the Peninsula; these reveal a conviction that sees music as a cosmic vision and an experience which may unlock the fulness of life. The science of sound is conceived as grounded in the Deity, emanating through the angelic orders, causing harmony to the whole created order. It is the science capable of liberating the soul, unshackling the imaginative powers of the Intellect through what Plato and Ficino described as the 'Divine Frenzy' – that 'madness' known only too well in the inner tradition of the Italian genius. It is the 'folly' which dares to unveil beauty.

These remote, today obscure, Italian theorists, sought to encourage a rebirth in the understanding of number and proportion as the inner structure of all order. Furthermore, they set out to rediscover how the ancients had used the evocative power of sound to bring harmony to the soul, healing the passions through qualitative sound as the echo of the Deity's own rhythmic 'breathing'.

The texts are not so much concerned with the ecclesiastical theories of Medieval liturgical music (though they are recipients of the immediate past), but through trial and error become the sources of Western classical music. For example, Claude Palisca suggests that Franchino Gaffurio confused the ancient modes with those of the Middle Ages, a view he shares with Simon Mayr (Donizetti's teacher) writing about 1820. For Mayr, these 'confusions' helped to forge a continuum in music, enriching its growth and life for renewal. It was the revitalized approach to the symbolism of the musical scale (*scala*: ladder) and the force of harmonic sound which was to encourage generations of composers to attempt to record their inspirations by signs on staves, inspiration which could be interpreted and performed. The enlightened recognized with Plato that music had the power to change society, to heal or to disturb the soul. Hence, patrons and composers were responsible for the quality of the expression of musical language, must seek to harmonize the inner life, not ruthlessly to disturb it, as was to become the vogue.

It is often customary to ridicule the metaphysical and philosophical framework upon which such theories depended. Perhaps it would be more perceptive to acknowledge that such concepts were figurative patterns indicating the ideal towards which the inner life of the psyche strives. Dante provided the clue. Once he had gained his vision of knowledge and love, he cast away his scaffolding of imagery. The genius of the science of Western music is likewise a scaffolding, permitting a sonata, a cantata, a concerto, a symphony, an opera. Perhaps such knowledge is ultimately more than mere scaffolding, for it is the knowledge of the craft that permits the cup to hold the wine that intoxicates the soul.

Particular praise should be awarded to Eco's book. Since 1963, Byzantine aesthetics have been well served by Gervase Matthews's masterly work, whereas the apparently more accessible world of the Middle Ages, though encouraging a profusion of books, has not, up to now, been blessed with a comparable study. Both books are about the same length; Eco's is notable for its compact information as well as provocative thought.

His text succeeds because it juxtaposes an essentially platonic world of theological speculation with science, literature, art and mysticism, thus conveying the vast cosmological scaffolding which encouraged the medieval mind to create things of beauty. The reader of this book is left with a vast edifice of learning (recalling the doomed library in Eco's novel) which was to collapse from the Renaissance onwards. The causes for this fascinate the author. He suggests that the business of making became unconsciously more and more imbued with the act of genius and inspiration. The artist was emerging from the anonymous ranks of craftsmen. Furthermore, the beautiful object, valued for itself, its gold and glittering jewels, was eventually to command more respect than the contemplative vision upon which such art and beauty depended for its inspiration. In other words, the centre was lost for the sake of the circumference, and this, without the controlling point of orientation, broke up into fragments. The fragments soon became imbued with mannerist theories concerning the individual and his 'genius' – one has but to think of Cellini's autobiography.

The Italian is blessed with the figure of Dante at the heart of his literary education and any excess of Dante is balanced with tales from Boccaccio. The Italian is admirably equipped to free the interpretation of the Middle Ages from the overdose of puritanism they have tended to receive from scholars. Eco is at pains to show that asceticism, such as that of St Bernard, is grounded in the senses and the appreciation of sensual beauty. Just as St Bernard disapproved of an excess of beans in a monastic diet (for obvious dietary reasons), Eco disapproves of the overdose of dualism which has so often been foisted onto the medievals and their world by a fundamentalist twist of the mind. Eco leads his reader through his main themes of beauty, proportion, light, symbol, allegory, perception, unity, theory and decline, with theology as his measuring



stick, but never does he attempt a reconciliation of the period by way of a narrow dogma or barren orthodoxy. The Italian soul finds no problem in portraying St Peter with the elegance of an icon image alongside the fisherman of Galilee with his pimples, strained muscles and tiring veins. Hence, the author is as happy with Joyce as Dante, Coomaraswamy as St Bernard.

The visionary worlds were soon banished and by the Eighteenth century Blake had to create his own mythological cosmology. By the second half of the Twentieth century we find Eco having to write his 'story' (in which he says he believes) into a medieval detective tale. The circumference breaks into smaller and smaller pieces.

Oxford University Press has made available the second volume of essays by Edgar Wind. These come from the years before Wind turned his attention to interpreting Renaissance humanist thought. One had expected essays like the *Dream of Poliphillus* and *Titian and Pietro Aretino* or the long awaited papers on Michelangelo, but instead one finds Hume, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Hogarth, Blake and others. Reading these essays with hindsight, it is possible to understand why Wind abandoned the Eighteenth century for the Renaissance. His acute mind, that of a philosopher looking for psychological truth, found superficiality in the so-called 'age of Enlightenment' when contrasted with the visionary worlds still to be found in the writings of Ficino and Pico. The new volume takes its title from the first essay which discusses Hume's views on portraiture and how Reynolds reacted against them. Wind's strength of argument is understatement. This essay indicates the gulf between his and Eco's choice of period, one drew its inspiration from the 'face of God', whilst the other was content with the portraits of individuals and their ephemeral pursuits.

Wind's references to Blake indicate that the inner worlds of Blake's thought had not caught his attention; this is to the gain of Reynolds who receives a rich and rewarding reappraisal. He is seen to stand closer to Blake than expected! Both men opposed the 'small' world of David Hume, whose views on art Wind allows to speak for themselves. Here is the comfortable room where brass birds fly across the wall to complement poker, tongs and fenders. Hume will not have his world disturbed by 'imagination' or 'enthusiasm'; preferable to him is the 'useful' and the 'agreeable'. Within a few pages Wind unmasks Hume's outlook as being one of the main sources for today's armchair media.

It is Wind's contention that the philosophy of an age is reflected in its art. Hence, Gainsborough painted the natural 'undisturbing' portrait ('Gentlemen make no part of the artist', was his remark), whereas Reynolds sought to cast his sitters in heroic settings and postures, embuing them with a presence so as to 'awaken in the spectator the memory of an Idea'. Gainsborough clung to the material world from which Reynolds would free himself in favour of the grand tradition inherited from the Renaissance. But Gainsborough makes a confused champion of the Enlightenment: he could not control his 'enthusiasm' or

'imagination'. Consider his technique or constant desire to be off and to play his viol da gamba with J. C. Bach. Also he 'was in the habit of going out into the streets and fields, gathering up grasses, pieces of moss, all sorts of animals, and often cottage children and gypsies to bring them back to his studio – where he used the animals and the children as models, and assembled small landscapes on his table from grasses and moss, adding various articles, pieces of wood, fragments of looking-glass, and so on, all of which he copied' (Reynolds).

Excellent is the contrast between the artists' self-portraits. In one, the young Reynolds shields his eyes from the light with the gesture of an illuminatus; whereas, the young Gainsborough looks as if he had just emerged from an inn after a quick drink. The elderly Reynolds is consciously cast in the evocative worlds of Titian, Michelangelo and Rembrandt. Gainsborough is honest to the passing of time and the tiring of the flesh.

The theme of the portrait could be said to encapsulate the descent of the West into individualism (I am thinking of Guénon's *The crisis of the modern world*). Wind's fascinating essay suggests a study of the emergence of the portrait in the West until the present. For example, the recent Marlborough Gallery exhibition of paintings by Christopher Couch, in which were seen barren rooms (with an occasional promise of a view through a window) in which stand or sit lonely, alienated and tragic figures. Gone is the world of Reynolds, even the informality of Gainsborough, instead we see a world where the soul wanders unadopted, confused – dying.

All the other essays contained in this book provoke thought; rarely is the world of art history studied with such perception.

John Allitt

## A Just Celebration

Jean Mambrino – *Le chant profond*, Librairie José Corti, 1985, 150FF

Jean Mambrino – *Glade*, translated by Jonathan Griffin, Enitharmon Press, 1986, £5.95.

Roy Fisher – *A Furnace*, Oxford University Press, 1986, £4.95.

Celebratory criticism is rare; truly revelatory criticism is possibly rarer. Both reach a height of excellence in these studies by Jean Mambrino. I do not think there has been anything like this in English since the wise enthusiasms of John Cowper Powys and the explorations by scholars and poets such as Bowra, Gilbert Highet and Edwin Muir. Rilke's remark that nothing touches a work of art so little as criticism is true of most journalism and much academic study; it does not apply to Jean Mambrino, whose work is creatively interpretative: he



opens doors, finds secret rooms and illuminates corners that the most devoted reader would often miss. Added to this, the scope of his understanding and appreciation is wide and catholic, so that one wonders how one mind can contain so universal a sweep of illumination.

The breadth of comprehension may be seen by realising that this book considers twenty-two writers varying from Norge and Céline to Claudel, St-John Perse and Yourcenar and is authoritative on Isaac B. Singer and Jean Giono. It contains one of the best commentaries on Patrick White that has come my way,\* emphasising the importance of *Riders in the Chariot*, from which English critics tend to retreat. But the theme of *Le chant profond* inspires and justifies such right attention, since the depth of perception makes a unity out of so apparently diverse a collection.

Many of these essays are probably the best introduction to the author discussed (though I wish that the article on Yannis Ritsos considered more of his work). For many students each essay would suffice instead of a full reading of the author, as quotations are so diligently selected and copiously given. But hardly any student would remain content with this, since he would be spurred to locate the citations in their context and search for others. If anyone wants a justification of Simenon (in spite of Gide and others) let him read and be redirected – he will immediately go to the library or the paperback shop. The reason for all this lies in the brief final essay *La Poésie, ou bien . . .*, which shows how it is in poetry and literature similar to it that comes the lightning caused by the meeting of two dark nights, like cold and warm fronts, in which the mysterious essence of man, unknown to himself, encounters the essence of the things, equally mysterious. For, as Mambrino tells us, there is no poetry that has not a deep love of Being, and Being is in each small fragment or thing in the world, however apparently insignificant. And that is why all poetry has also the delight which is the promise of beatitude to come, the scent from a closed garden that yet sometimes reaches our nostrils. In this wisdom is the explanation of the success of criticism such as this – it is inspired by *le chant profond*, so that in it Céline's love of the mischievous kids of Wapping connects with the greatness of St-John Perse and the agonies of the riders in the Chariot.

The poetry of a man whose all-embracing profundity illuminates this book of essays could be disappointing, as it might lack the myriad-mindedness of the criticism. A poem such as *Glade* (Jonathan Griffin's translation of *Clairière*) might seem restricted after that opulence of comprehension. It is not so, as the depth, breadth, magnification and microscopic perception of the creative criticism is in the poetry, concentrated as by a prism working backwards. The poem could be taken as a description of a glade through the seasons – in fact an English reader too warped by the reading of countless 'magazine pieces' such as are now *de rigueur* might err by trying to read each section as a separate entity; some

\* Published in *Temenos* 2.

are so good as to excuse this – but the process would miss the deeper level of the work. As Kathleen Raine shows in her introduction, for Mambrino here the glade is also what the sea is to St-John Perse in *Amers*. To visit the glade is to encounter Being and experience Being.

A work of such pregnancy and profundity makes the translator's task difficult, because the short sections might at first seem to a linguist easy. But what matters is what they seem to a poet, at various levels. Mambrino does not present the lexical problems of, say, Pierre Emmanuel, Césaire or Norge – but like Bonnefoy may present lines whose very depth of simplicity can be lost in the rendering (as non-linguists may understand if they try to alter the word-order of some lyrics of Wordsworth). Jonathan Griffin's *Glade* reads as an English poem and is also a faithful interpretation of Mambrino's *Clairière*. To translate so knowledgeable a poet (himself a skilled translator) must have been a daunting task; I remember a distinguished poet with wide knowledge of French criticising Eliot's version of *Anabase* when it had been approved and partly suggested by St-John Perse himself. A similar critic might quarrel with

it has not the skill to take  
account of lying

for

elle ne sait pas faire  
au mensonge sa part

but would be wrong. At times there is a justified boldness: when lovers are in the glade

une épaule végétale  
brille un instant dans la mêlée  
l'éclat des yeux la gorge ronde  
le ruisseau des flancs qui fuient

becomes

one convoluted shoulder  
gleams for an instant in the play  
the rounded breast the flash of eyes  
the streams of thighs flowing away.

And I am grateful for

and as though against its will protects  
her  
whose name it has let fall

for

et protège comme malgré elle  
celle  
dont elle a perdu le nom.

These scraps of praise fortify the sympathy for the achievement of Jonathan Griffin in bringing to the English reader the experience of and in a remarkable poem. It would be to betray the feeling of the poem to analyse (by pointing out, for example, that this is not comfortable nature-poetry, as rape and murder occur, the dark being there as well as the light); poetry such as this is not analogy to be explained – it is a whole; one does not annotate

at the glade's exact centre  
once every million years  
the whole of light condenses  
into one butterfly's spark.

John Cowper Powys is one of those writers whose sense of Being and use of imagination would appeal to Jean Mambrino. Powys is the inspiration behind Roy Fisher's *A Furnace*, a poem which is in one way a continuation of *City* (1961) but in another a remarkable example of Heraclitean fire and an unexpected reassertion of Romantic values which the Industrial Revolution obscured in a profiteering and dehumanising urge that left whole areas of this island littered with material and human dereliction. Fisher is concerned with his native Birmingham, which he considers with wit, sympathy and sentiment, but he does not need the rage or appeal of Tony Harrison as he sees this episode, like all episodes, in perspective, with the basic Powysian idea that 'the making of all kinds of identities is a primary impulse the cosmos itself has; and . . . these identities and that impulse can be acknowledged only by some form or other of poetic imagination.' The life of the cosmos tries and goes on trying, since there are

The true gods, known only  
as those of whom there is no news;  
  
rebellious, repressed, indestructible  
right access to the powers of the world;  
  
by tyrannies given images . . .

and then, of course, discarded: but

. . . There have always been  
saucers put out for us  
by the gods. We're called  
for what we carry.

The poem ends with a section on the snails of Ampurias, an extensive Celtiberian, and later Roman, mercantile settlement in Catalonia, and somehow the snails on fennel are more important than the jet planes that may fly over them. The cosmos creates identities, renews Being.

Many will find this Romanticism strange in Fisher – but the true faith of

surrealism and avant-gardism is that an open mind, conscious and unconscious, is one to which the gods may speak ;

Sudden and grotesque  
callings. Grown man  
without right learning; by nobody  
guided to the places; not knowing  
what might speak; having eased awkwardly  
into the way of being called.

The experience of techniques and attitudes in the previous work of Roy Fisher leads to this achievement, brilliant in design (the whole depending on the image of the furnace) and the whole written in language which has become the true medium of human intelligence and imagination, agile, sinewy, telling, and by eschewing lyricism attaining lyricism's true aim. This is a poem beside which most contemporary poetry looks pale, uninspired and uninspiring; it is a true work of imagination.

Brian Merrikin Hill

## These are the Alps

William Cookson. *A guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*. Croom Helm. £19.95. Hardback. £12.95. Paperback.

These are the Alps. What is there to say about them?  
They don't make sense. Fatal glaciers, crags cranks climb,  
jumbled boulder and weed, pasture and boulder, scree,  
*et l'on entend, maybe, le refrain joyeux et léger,*  
Who knows what the ice will have scraped on the rocks it is smoothing?

There they are, you will have to go a long way round  
if you want to avoid them.  
It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps,  
fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble.

Basil Bunting's delightful and ironic poem, *On the Fly Leaf of Pound's Cantos*, is quoted by William Cookson as 'better than any commentary;' in fact, Cookson's commentaries and glossaries are invaluable in indicating the landmarks of that long, bewildering, intermittently radiant, journey.

In 1958 Cookson, then a schoolboy, visited Pound in Rapallo. From that

meeting came his interest in and passion for Pound's work, Cookson's literary magazine *AGENDA* (which has survived for 27 years), his edition of Pound's prose (*Selected Prose 1909-1965*) and a long correspondence in Pound's uniquely eccentric style, which caused Eliot to write testily: 'I am incidentally annoyed myself, by occasional use of the peculiar orthography, which characterises Pound's correspondence.'

This background and Cookson's close study of Pound's many sources (*The Confucian Odes*, Homer, Hesiod, Catullus, Ovid, Li Po, Cavalcanti, Dante, Chaucer, Villon, Shakespeare and Browning) make this an informed and perceptive guide to Pound's epic. It is not, Cookson states, in an unpretentious introduction, a scholarly work, but 'an attempt to outline the main themes and structure of the *Cantos*, and to provide sufficient information for new readers to enjoy the poem.'

Cookson includes a useful anthology of Pound's own statements on the *Cantos*. In 1960 in an interview in the *Paris Review* Pound stated:

The problem was to build up a circle of reference – taking the modern mind to be the mediaeval mind with wash after wash of classical culture poured over it since the renaissance. That was the psyche, if you like.

Asked what he intended for the remaining cantos after *Thrones*, Pound replied:

It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse. I am trying to collect the top flights of the mind . . . I must find a verbal formula to combat the rise of brutality – the principle of order versus the split atom.

Cookson points out that in the first *Canto* when Odysseus descends into the underworld there is a warning of Pound's own fate in 'Odysseus/Shall return through spiteful Neptune, over dark seas,/Lose all companions', which was to happen to Pound in the barbarous cage at Pisa and later at St. Elizabeth.

Cookson sees *Canto XIII*, the philosophy of Kung (Confucius 551-479 BC), as giving the universe of the *Cantos* an order made out of 'strains and tensions', which is not imposed but organic. 'It expresses', he adds, 'Pound's innate tolerance and *humanitas* – a quality which the rage and fanaticism of some of his writing can never wipe out'.

The *Cantos* dealing with Jefferson and Adams and the beginnings of American civilisation show Pound's epic as 'being as American as Homer's was Greek.' Later Cookson writes:

It is probably impossible to have the kind of acute perception which Pound possessed without a counter-balancing blindness. In politics he missed much which was obvious to people not 'afflicted with genius'. But it needs to be pointed out that despite Pound's admiration for Mussolini,

the political thought of the *Cantos* represents an attempt to restore the Anglo-Saxon heritage – it is against unlimited sovereignty and therefore fundamentally anti-fascist.

Canto XLV contains Pound's denunciation of usury, defined as a charge for the use of purchasing power, levied without regard to production. The canto ends:

Usura slayeth the child in the womb  
It stayeth the young man's courting  
It hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth  
between the young bride and her bridegroom

CONTRA NATURAM

They have brought whores for Eleusis  
Corpses are set to banquet  
at behest of usura.

Pound's belief that the banking system was a major cause of war was held by many at the time. The question of international banking is a muddy one and Pound's ideas were hardly eccentric. He was still hammering the question in his wartime broadcasts from Radio Rome.

In 1939, however, Pound had finished his Adams and Confucian cantos and was innocently considering his paradiso. He was, instead, approaching his own inferno.

In the *Pisan Cantos*, Cookson writes:

Pound came here to realise the truth of something he had only hinted at in 1938 . . . 'a modern Eleusis being possible in the wilds of a man's mind only? (Guide to Kulchur p. 294). But the vision, 'To build the city of Dioce whose terraces are the colour of stars' remains, strengthened by suffering, 'now in the mind indestructible'.

It was probably not until 1953 or 1954 that Pound was able to continue the *Cantos*. Cookson sees him as nearing his paradiso in the *Rock-Drill Cantos* through thesis/antithesis. 'Moving, because it is of the moment – real, but fragile as a moth's wing. 'Beloved, do not fall apart in my hands.'

It is in the commentary to the final *Drafts & Fragments*, however, that Cookson leads us towards Pound's last statements. I quote three paragraphs to give an idea of the quality of Cookson's work:

In 1963, three years after the early draft of these cantos had been written, Pound said in an interview in the Italian magazine *Epoca*: 'I cannot get to the core of my thoughts any more with words'. *Drafts & Fragments* is poetry on

the brink of silence. It is deep with a clear depth that is the opposite of obscurity.

It is one of the tasks of poetry to affirm the existence of paradise, even though it can probably exist only in the 'wilds of a man's mind'.

For nothing can be whole or sole  
That has not been rent.

As it is impossible to conceive of perfection without its opposite, it is fitting that the closing passages of Pound's paradise should be composed of fragments:

To make cosmos –  
To achieve the impossible . . .

'Two mice and a moth my guides –'. Except perhaps at Pisa, the vision at the heart of the *Cantos* has never been more movingly, nor more vulnerably, expressed:

I have brought the great ball of crystal  
Who can lift it?  
Can you enter the great acorn of light?

Pound leaves the great question to us. In this guide the route there has been illuminated by a path finder whose attention to the text, close study of references, and able translations of foreign phrases have charted the journey of the long suffering Pound from the underworld to a measure of light.

A little light, like a rushlight  
to lead back to splendour.

Jean MacVean

## Poems of Pain, Poems of Praise

*Collected Poems of Frances Bellerby*, Enitharmon Press, £9 hardback, paperback £5.25.

*Collected Poems*. Samuel Menashe. National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, Orono, Maine. \$18 (cloth) \$12.50 (paperback). 220 pp.

The best poetry by women belongs to psyche's world or to the personal world of feelings, the 'reasons of the heart'. Frances Bellerby stands in the tradition of Emily Brontë (or Dickinson for that matter), making of her inner solitude a source of experience whose intensity and integrity earns her a place among the few women writers who have realized to the full the range and scope of their inner life. This selection of her best work by Anne Stevenson, with an excellent biographical introduction by Robert Gittings, appearing eleven years after her



death, ensures that Frances Bellerby will not be forgotten by discriminating readers with the gift of finding hidden treasures among England's minor poets.

Frances Bellerby's life was one of exceptional suffering. Beautiful and gifted, she was the daughter of an idealist Anglo-Catholic vicar and his wife, in whose house carpets and curtains were a luxury they did not permit themselves in their service of the poor. Culture however was not seen as a luxury and Frances had first a governess, and then went to a boarding school where she was happy and successful, excelling above all as an athlete. She made her way to London where she began to be known as a literary journalist, poet and novelist; married an economist and social reformer (a socialist and pacifist) and all seemed set fair when, on a holiday at Lulworth, she fell on rocks injuring her spine. From then on she was crippled and in more or less continuous pain. 'I am NEVER used to it', she wrote in 1951, 'I NEVER shall be . . . I NEVER shall be reconciled to this'. In 1932 her mother committed suicide; (her only and beloved brother had been blown to bits in the trenches in 1915); in 1934 she left her husband; in 1950 she contracted cancer, and was at first told it was inoperable. In 1951 an operation was performed that gave her a remission of twenty-five years but in her own mind she felt she had 'died' then, and returned, like Lazarus, from the other side of the grave.

From all this Frances Bellerby drew her painful poetry. Her first, and immediately successful, collection, *Plash Mill* (1947) written at her much-loved lonely Cornish house so named, appeared when she was nearing fifty. Her rather clumsy style, and her range of themes situate her in the period of Walter de la Mare, but also within the central tradition of English nature-poets. Solitude (and hers was her imagination's choice) is of all ways of life the most intense. For her, nature was a continuous and living communication; those for whom this is not so are 'the living dead':

And if the wind comes from the sea to the living dead  
By some million-flowered way,  
No eyes are blinded  
With tears – there is no cause for ecstasy.

For her there was cause for ecstasy in every grass-blade and spider in the hedgerow. Her companions were her strange pets – she bred tortoises and ruby-eyed oak-egg-moths – the lizard on a leaf 'brought from and through all time', the feather-footed vixen, the light, the leaves.

Her sense of haunting presences, of its past in some deserted house in a landscape whose rural sleep was still undisturbed by the advent of machines, is of her period; as are her dactylic metres:

I heard those voices again today,  
Of voices of women and children down in that hollow,  
Of blazing light into which swoops the tree-darkened lane



But her solitude is also populous with her own Presence:

But what do I half-sense?  
Someone is commenting? Calling?  
Who? Is it I?  
Or am I myself called from far, always too far away,  
The voice lost swiftly as a wild star seen falling, falling.

or

. . . the glass green light,  
The clearest light of all,

Making it seem that a hollow green world of light  
Just over the rim of the hill  
Must be the goal of the heart's cruel journey home  
And the end of all.

Later her style and her themes also became less derivative and her verse rings with her own clear note of pain, solitude, and her vision of beauty and intimations of meaning. Sometimes she attains a bare splendour:

With pen cut from moon's horn  
And dipped in blood of sun  
I wrote first on the surface of the sea.  
Was that so ill-done?

Then, paring my spread wits  
To lightning point of judgment,  
I slashed the second poem on the wind.  
Call that a slight achievement?

The third on sand, fourth on snow,  
Took ordained shape.  
Fifth flowed out onto a rainbow  
With neither pause nor slip.

Sixthly, dived that streaming star  
From heaven's tall peak,  
Blazoned in sizzling letters of fire  
With words I was born to speak.

Now may the seventh leave me alone  
To the dark grace of the dead  
And cool mortal kindness of this stone,  
My daily bread.

There is dignity both moral and intellectual in this imaginative experience of extreme suffering explored by Francis Bellerby. She wrung her bread from the stone that broke her body but not her spirit:

Can any find what is lost?  
 Never, never.  
 Yet some search with their hearts  
 Ever, ever.

In this collection there is a handful of poems spoken with the authentic voice of poetry. Enitharmon Press has also published a volume of her stories.

Samuel Menashe's book is one in a thousand and will never pall. His poems, he says, are psalms, written because he was not taught Hebrew as a boy and so had to write his own praise of 'The Many-Named Beloved' (title of his first collection, published in 1961).

O Many Named Beloved  
 Listen to my praise  
 Various as the seasons  
 Different as the days.  
 All my treasons cease  
 When I see your face.

The background is biblical, the foreground contemporary Manhattan whose streets and parks the poet walks in his long solitary meditation as he weighs every word – or rather as Donald Davie writes in a perceptive foreword – every syllable. By the authority and intensity of his own dedication he compels us to attend to the briefest of poems which are far from slight, indeed infinite in meaning; like

Pity us  
 by the sea  
 on the sands  
 so briefly

Samuel Menashe finds all at hand, his own flesh and bones suffice to speak of all life and mortality. He is writing from, but not about, himself in the unusually long, but still densely powerful poem 'No Jerusalem but this':

The shrine whose shape I am  
 Has a fringe of fire  
 Flames skirt my skin  
 There is no Jerusalem but this  
 Breathed in flesh by shameless love  
 Built high upon the tides of blood

I believe the Prophets and Blake  
 And like David bless myself  
 With all my might  
 I know many hills were holy once  
 But now in level lands to live  
 Zion ground down must become marrow  
 Thus in my bones I'm the King's son  
 And through death's domain I go  
 Making my own procession

The same perception of the sufficiency of every being as its own offering is more briefly stated in:

A pot poured out  
 Fulfils its spout

Biblical image and allusion is always present but always realised and immediate:

At the edge  
 Of a world  
 Beyond my eyes  
 Beautiful  
 I know Exile  
 Is always  
 Green with hope –  
 The river  
 We cannot cross  
 Flows for ever

Depth and clarity of feeling is never marred by any trace of exaggeration. The death of the poet's mother and her life become an infinite space for love to explore and inhabit:

The silence is vast  
 I am still and wander  
 Keeping you in mind  
 There is never enough  
 Time to know another

Samuel Menashe's landscape, though visited by sun and wind and snow, is anonymous and urban –

I look up and see  
 Your windows, the house  
 Standing on this street  
 Like an old tombstone  
 Whose dates disappear  
 I still name you here

These spacious, profound poems are the more than bread without which we cannot live. Not all are successful (or perhaps all or most would be for the right person on the right occasion) many are light-hearted. Some are witty and funny like the poem from a calender of the month of July when, as all know, you can fry eggs on the scorching pavements of New York City:

But who would eat  
An egg you fry  
On the sidewalk  
In July?

Poems by Samuel Menashe have been published in *Temenos* 1 and *Temenos* 6.

Kathleen Raine

## A Treasure House of Images

*Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* by an Anonymous Author. New York, Amity House, 1985, pp. 658, \$44.95

The perennial wisdom of the human imagination contains many strange elements: dreams, myths, whole philosophies are contained within its house. Perhaps none of these is more curious than the system of archetypal emblems known as the Tarot, comprising a series of twenty-two picture cards (the subject of these meditations) and a further fifty-six pip cards. The origins of the Tarot, or Tarocchi, are long since lost to us, despite repeated attempts to ascribe its beginnings to ancient Egypt or the wandering Romany. It has been systematically debased throughout the ages until, in our own symbolically illiterate age, it is regarded as little more than a fortune-telling device. Yet this same system, which a recent commentator has described as 'a treasure-house of images', has provided inspiration to the imaginal arts on many levels and, from the Middle Ages to the end of the Renaissance, embodied a symbolic language as familiar as the iconic conventions contained within the great paintings of the time.

*Meditations on the Tarot* is a very pure blend of Christian, esoteric and philosophical thought, presented in a way that at once restores and at the same time ennoble the original imagery of the Tarot, presenting it for the first time as an aspect of the spiritual path. Its author, who died in 1978, chose to remain anonymous so that no personal element should intrude between the text and the reader. He was, in fact, a highly respected figure within the Anthroposophical movement. He was, indeed, one of those Christian philosophers

whose steps have strayed outside orthodox ways into what has become known as Christian esotericism, or in the present frame of reference Hermeticism. Others who have followed this sometimes dangerous route are as varied as Thomas Aquinas, Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, Hildegard of Bingen, or more recently both William Blake and W. B. Yeats.

The orthodox Christian view sees the Tarot as a purely divinatory system, unnecessary in the light of the Incarnation or the doctrine of the Four Last Things. Hermeticism, as promulgated in the teachings attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, is itself a highly eclectic blend of early Christian doctrine, pure myth and gnosis. Christian Hermeticism, therefore, is able to draw upon, on the one hand, the writings of Plato and the interpretations of the Neo-Platonic schools, and on the other the theological edifice erected by the Church Fathers.

This has led to some difficulty among the followers of both paths, the one decrying the other as either hidebound or heretical. The author of *Meditations on the Tarot*, by setting his clearly Christian vision within the framework of an esoteric system, attempts to reconcile the two, seeing as the common denominator, shared by both approaches, the way of the mystic. Mysticism, he declares, 'is the source and root of all religion. Without it religion and the entire spiritual life of humanity would be only a code of laws regulating human thought and action.' Thus it is impossible, judges our author, to be either a Christian or a magician without also being a mystic, for mysticism is 'the seed of gnosis, which is esoteric theology, just as magic is esoteric art and occultism or Hermeticism is esoteric philosophy.'

Ultimately then, the goal of either approach is seen as being the same: to experience, as directly as possible, the unique essence of being which we may choose to call God or Logos. If the desire for this knowing is sufficiently pure, it will ultimately lead to a development of the 'gnostic sense'. If the aspirant 'wants not only to live but also to learn to understand what he lives through . . . if he wants to put into practice what he has understood from mystical experience, he will develop the magical sense . . . if lastly, he wants all that he has experienced, understood and practised to be not limited to himself and his time, but to become communicable to others . . . he must develop the Hermetic-philosophical sense . . . such is the law of the birth of tradition.'

This premise, as does much else in the book, poses problems both for the Christian and Magical approach. There are many who would declare, with perfect validity, that there are simpler and more direct routes to God, though this may, in itself, lead to fundamentalism rather than an open-eyed understanding. Certain qualities are therefore required if one is to pursue the often uncertain or intricate path of Hermeticism. Hans Urs von Balthasar, in his introduction to the French edition (unaccountably omitted from this printing) describes these as 'a certain sixth sense, and also a feeling for the boundaries of that which is to be communicated, together with a respectful and reverent attitude towards the mystery of the individual's religious path.' We might add

that the path of the Christian Hermeticist is that of the walker-between-the-worlds, and that this is also the path of the Magician, and of the imaginal writer. The author of *Meditations on the Tarot*, by keeping a foot in both worlds, steers a careful path through the labyrinth, opening a way into the numinous which for many can only be a richly transformative experience.

Originally completed in 1967, and written in French, this book has taken nearly twenty years to reach us in an English language edition, here translated by Robert Powell. The meditations are so much a product of their author's thought that they form a unique system of their own. In this they reflect the Tarot itself, which may be likened to a suite of rooms within the Theatre of Memory containing the essence of the perennial wisdom. Those who are able to respond to them will themselves become repositories of a living tradition, for as the author states in his introduction, 'the links in the chain of tradition are not thoughts and efforts alone; they are above all living beings.'

John Matthews.

## Notes on Contributors

**Ameena Ahmed Ahuja** was born in India, her mother was English, her father Indian. Her childhood was spent in Delhi and London where she read philosophy at London University and has also a Ph.D. in comparative philology from Moscow University. She studied painting at Camberwell and the Slade School of Art and at the Courtauld Institute. A study of oriental miniatures and Russian icons led to a study of relevant languages and literatures, especially poetry. From her father she learned a range of calligraphic styles, including Kufic, Nastaliq and Shikaste. In her paintings an animal or a bird takes shape within the framework of this script, drawing too on the spirit and meaning of the text. She works with the verses of Abu Nuwas, Hafiz, Saadi, Rumi, Ghalib, Iqbal, Faiz and others. She has exhibited widely in India and also shown in London, Tokyo, New York, Moscow and Caracas. Her work is represented in private collections in the Gulf States, New York, Caracas and India and in the Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow and National Museum of Jordan.

**John Allison.** After quite a number of years teaching in a Rudolf Steiner school, he is now fully occupied as a father and a writer. Next year he is publishing a volume of poetry and is working also on a sequence of short stories, essays on the theme of relationships, and some translations. He has written and spoken on the Quest of the Holy Grail, 'and when there is nothing to do, I play the lute.'

**John Allitt**, in collaboration with Ian Caddy, is at present occupied in reviving the music of Johann Simon Mayr and of his student, Gaetano Donizetti. The *Mayr + Donizetti Collaboration* has prepared musical editions and has helped to bring about unique performances on the radio and in the concert hall. A recording is shortly to be issued, as well as a book on Donizetti's songs. Also in preparation is the first comprehensive study of Mayr. The *Collaboration's* aim is to contribute to the understanding and revaluation of the perennial values in Western classical music through the work of Mayr and Donizetti.

**Wendell Berry**, poet, essayist, novelist and Kentucky farmer. His novels *A Place on Earth* and *The Memory of Old Jack* and *The Wild Birds* (a collection of short stories, 1986), are concerned with the same group of characters. His first novel, *Nathan Coulter*, is reprinted by the North Point Press (Berkeley, Cal) who have also published *The Gift of Good Land* (further essays cultural and agricultural), *Recollected Essays*, *Standing by Words*, *The Wheel* (his eighth collection of poems) and *The Collected Poems of Wendell Berry 1957-1982*.

**George Mackay Brown**, poet, playwright and story-teller, lives in Orkney. He was a friend and former student of Edwin and Willa Muir, at Newbattle Abbey, near Edinburgh. Recent books include *Pictures in the Cave*, *Portrait of Orkney*, *Greenvoe*, *Time in a Red Coat*, *Stone*, *Scottish Bestiary*.

**John Carey** is a lecturer in the Department of Celtic at Harvard University. Besides his articles in *Temenos*, he has contributed to various journals specializing in folklore and Celtic studies.

**Henry Corbin**: The following works by the late Henry Corbin, the great Iranian scholar, himself worthy to be included within the Sufi tradition on which he has written with learning and insight, are at present available in English translations: *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, (Bollingen Series, LXVI), New York, 1960, tr. W. R. Trask. (Reprint ed: Spring Books, Dallas, 1980). *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi*, (Bollingen Series, XCI), Princeton, 1969, tr. Ralph Manheim. *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, (Bollingen Series, XCI:2), Princeton, 1977, tr. N. Pearson. *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, Shambhala Press, Boulder and London, 1978, tr. N. Pearson. *Cyclical Time and Ismaili Gnosis*, Kegan Paul International in association with Islamic Publications (Islamic Texts and Contexts Series, The Institute of Ismaili Studies), London, 1983, tr. R. Manheim and J. Morris. *Temple and Contemplation* (Tr. Philip Sherrard) Kegan Paul International in association with Islamic Publications London, 1986.

A complete Bibliography of the writings of Henry Corbin is to be found in Henry Corbin, *Les Cahiers de l'Herne*, Paris, 1981.

Recently published in France: *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Gallimard, Collection Folio/Essais) (1986) *L'alchimie comme art hiératique* (L'Herne, Bibliothèque des mythes et des religions) (1986) and *Sohravardi's La Livre de la Sagesse Orientale* (Verdier, 1987).

**Neil Curry**, poet and translator. Teaches in the Lake District. His translations of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* and *The Bacchae* are published by the Cambridge University Press. A collection of poems, *Between Root and Sky*, was published by the Mandeville Press.

**Robin Fulton** b. Scotland 1937. *Selected Poems 1963–1978* (Macdonald, Edinburgh, 1980) gathers work from several volumes. Edited the quarterly *Lines Review* from 1967 to 1976 and the associated *Lines Review Editions*; also published *Contemporary Scottish Poets: Individuals and Contexts* (Macdonald, Edinburgh, 1974). Held Writer's Fellowship at Edinburgh University 1969–1971. Swedish writers translated include Werner Aspenström, Gunnar Ekelöf, Kjell Espmark, Lars Gustafsson, Gunnar Harding, Pär Lagerkvist, Östen Sjöstrand and Tomas Tranströmer: for Swedish translations given the Artur Lundkvist award for 1977



and the Swedish Academy award for 1978. Has recently edited Iain Crichton Smith's *Selected Poems 1955–1980* (Macdonald, Edinburgh, 1981) and Robert Garioch's *Complete Poetical Works* and *A Garioch Miscellany* (Macdonald, Edinburgh, 1985). His latest collection of poems is *Fields of Focus* (Anvil Press, London, 1982).

**David Gascoyne**, poet, translator, and author of journals and writings of many kinds. Widely known in Europe, and especially in France, through his association with the Surrealist movement. The following books are available: *Collected Poems* (Oxford University Press) *Journal, 1936–7*, *Journal, 1937–9* (Enitharmon Press). A selection of his poems translated into Italian by Roberto Sanesi won the Biela Prize for 1982; his *Journals* (translated by Christine Jordis, Flammarion) appeared in French translation in 1983, and a selection of his poems by several translators (Granit) is forthcoming. A *Short Survey of Surrealism* was published by City Lights, San Francisco, 1982 (First published 1935). A *Descriptive Bibliography* compiled by Colin T. Benford (1986) is available from Heritage Books, 7 Cross Street, Ryde, I.O.W. PO33 2AD. *Uncollected Poems* are forthcoming with the Oxford University Press. David Gascoyne is on the committee of the *Biennale Internationale de la Poésie* (Liège) and advises the Italian literary journal edited by Roberto Sanesi, *Nuova Revista Europea*. *Zero Hour*, a one-man show by Adam Godley (co-directed by Simon Callow) was played at the Edinburgh Festival (Fringe) in 1986 and is forthcoming in London.

**Michael Hamburger**, poet and scholar, translator of Hölderlin and other German poets. His *Collected Poems* (Persea Books, New York, and Carcanet Press, Manchester) were published in 1984 and a new revised edition in 1985. Carcanet Press is planning a *Selected Poems*. *Paul Celan: Poems* (bilingual edition) was published in the Persea Series of Poetry in Translation in 1980. An enlarged book of all Michael Hamburger's translations of Celan (including those published in *Temenos* 6) will be coming out with Anvil Press and Penguin Books.

**Brian Merrikin Hill**, a former headmaster, is now engaged in writing and translating Pierre Emmanuel and Saint-Pol-Roux. His own poems have appeared in reviews since 1942. Recent publications are *Wakeful in the Sleep of Time* (Taxis Press 1984), *Local History*, poems, (Littlewood Press 1985) and *The Unifying Prism*, *Selected Poems of Saint-Pol-Roux*, (Mammon Press 1986). It is hoped that *The European Letters* and a collection of translations from Pierre Emmanuel will appear soon. He edits *Pennine Platform*, a poetry review now in its twentieth year.

**Brian Keeble**, 'onlie begetter' of Golgonooza Press Books; also directs the publications programme of The Islamic Text Society. He has contributed to many journals in U.K. and abroad, and in 1983 his *Eric Gill, A Holy Tradition of Working* was published by Golgonooza Press.

**Francis Dufau-Labeyrie** lived for three years in Britain just before the Second World War. Early in 1937, he met Vernon Watkins and Dylan Thomas in Swansea. During the Summer of 1938, he accompanied Vernon to Dublin where they visited W. B. Yeats. Returning to Paris in 1939, he took his degree as Agrégé de l'Université and, from 1942 to 1947, taught English language and literature in France. During that period, he also worked on a number of translations into French, notably Dylan Thomas's *A Prospect of the Sea*, published in the monthly review *L'Arche* (1946) and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, Editions de Minuit (1947), Editions du Seuil (1970). An *Anthologie de la poésie anglaise contemporaine*, published in 1949 by *L'Arche*, contains a few of his translations of poems by W. B. Yeats and Vernon Watkins. In 1947, he left France for Canada to join the language services of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), in Montreal. He headed that department from 1952 until his retirement at the end of 1976. He still lives in Montreal. In the Spring of 1977, *Poetry Wales* published his contribution to a special number on Vernon Watkins.

**John Lane**, painter, writer and Trustee of the Dartington Hall Trust. He studied at the Slade School of Art and was founder-director of the Beaford Centre in North Devon where, with his wife and children, he still lives. Author of a book on Arts Centres and *The Death and Resurrection of the Arts*.

**Jan Le Witt**, painter, poet and designer. Originator of Britain's Second World War anti-invasion defences. One-man shows: London, Paris, Rome, Milan, New York, Philadelphia, etc. Retrospectives: Musée d'Antibes, Château Grimaldi, Zacheta Palace Warsaw, Sala Napoleonica (organised by the City of Venice.) Definitive monograph by Sir Herbert Read, Jean Cassou, John Smith, preface by Pierre Emmanuel of the Académie Française, London 1971, Paris 1972, New York 1973.

**Michael Loewe** was appointed University Lecturer in Chinese Studies at Cambridge in 1963. His main interests are in the history of the early Chinese empires (221 BC to AD 220). He has tried to explore some of the religious and intellectual developments of pre-Buddhist China on the basis of literary and archaeological evidence and artistic symbolism, in publications such as *Ways to Paradise: the Chinese Quest for Immortality* (1979), and *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death: faith, myth and reason in the Han period* (202 BC – AD 220).

**Rayne Mackinnon** lives in Edinburgh, where he has for many years been confined to hospital, where he nevertheless has continued to write. These and other of his *Elegies* have been published as *Northern Elegies* by the Netherbow Arts Centre, to whom we make grateful acknowledgements. Earlier collections are *The Spark of Joy*, 1970, *The Hitchhiker*, 1976 and 'The Blasting of Billy P.', 1978.

**David MacLagan**, b.1940, studied history at Oxford and painting at the Royal College of Art. He is a writer, artist, and art therapist. After teaching for ten years in art school he trained as an Art Therapist for five years in a therapeutic community in the N.H.S. and now teaches Art Therapy at Birmingham Polytechnic. He is the author of *Creation Myths* (Thames and Hudson 1977) and of numerous articles on art and psychotherapy. The *Templum* series of drawings was exhibited at the I.C.A. in December 1979. Founder and editor of *Iron Rations*, a journal that aims to publish texts and image of 'Matter to keep the spirit alive'.

**Jean MacVean**, poet, radio playwright, novelist. Her novel *The Intermediaries* was based on Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*. Edited Thomas Blackburn's *Last Poems*. Malory enthusiast.

**Jean Mambrino**. French poet and critic; has translated much English poetry, including Donne, Herbert, Hopkins, de la Mare, David Jones, David Gascoyne and Kathleen Raine. He writes regularly on literature, film and theatre for *Etudes*. His volume of poetry, *l'Oiseau-Coeur* was awarded the Prix Apollinaire for 1980 and his translation of Hopkins the Prix de Meilleur Livre Etranger (shared with Pierre Leyris) in 1981. *Glade* (English translation by Jonathan Griffin) is published by the Enitharmon Press (1986). *l'Or Interieur* (*The Inner Gold*) was published bilingually by the Menard Press in 1979. His published works in French are: *Le Veilleur Aveugle* (Mercure de France) 1965; *La Ligne du Feu* (Editeurs français réunis) 1974; *Clairière* (Desclée de Brouwer) 1974; *Sainte Lumière* (id. 1976); *l'Oiseau-Coeur*, preceded by *Clairière* and *Sainte Lumière* (Stock) 1979; *Ainsi Ruse la Mystère* (Corti) 1983; *Le Mot de Passe* (Granit) 1983; *Le Chant Profond* (criticism) (Corti) 1985; *La Saison du Monde* (Corti & Granit) 1986; *La Poésie Mystique Française* (Seghers) 1973 (Anthology).

**John Matthews**. Born 1948. Has made a specialist study of Arthurian Literature, specializing recently on the Grail legends, on which he has so far produced three books: *The Grail, Quest for the Eternal* (Thames & Hudson, 1981), *At The Table of the Grail* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), and *The Grail Seekers Companion* (with Marion Green). Aquarian Press 1986; *Warriors of Arthur* (with Bob Stewart) Blandford Press, 1987. He has also written a volume of poetry *Merlin in Calydon* (Brans Head, 1981) and numerous short stories on Arthurian and related themes. He is working on several projects, including the forthcoming *Warriors of Arthur* (written with Bob Stewart, Blandford Press, 1987), and the scenario for a ballet to be performed by the Royal Ballet in 1987/8. His latest publication (written with his wife Caitlin Matthews) is a two volume work on the Western Mystery Tradition *The Western Way*, (Arkana, 1985/6). He has contributed to leading literary and esoteric journals both here and in other countries and is a lecturer and speaker on Arthurian, Occult, and other subjects. In 1981 he was co-founder of the arts journal, *Labrys*.

**Basarab Nicolescu**, Doctor in Physical Sciences, is a theoretical physicist at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique who has specialised in the theory of elementary particles. He is the author of many scientific articles that have been published in international journals and a contributor to several collective works. He has long been interested in the relationship between art, science and Tradition. Since 1982 he has been on the board of editors of the interdisciplinary journal 'Le Millénaire'. Basarab Nicolescu has just published a book with the title *Nous, la Particule et le monde* (Le Mail).

**Peter Pelz**, artist, Arts-Director at St. James's Church, Piccadilly. Director of the Piccadilly Festival and Secretary of the Blake Society. A film of his work as a mural painter won a prize at the Chicago Film Festival in 1976. His series of drawings illustrating Novalis's 'Hymns to Night' will appear in *Temenos* 9.

**Kathleen Raine**. Poet, Blake scholar, etc. Her most recent publications are *Yeats the Initiate* (Dolmen Press, Dublin, George Allen and Unwin (London) and George Braziller (New York) and a new edition of her critical essays, *Defending Ancient Springs* (1967) (Golgonooza Press in conjunction with Lindisfarne Press, U.S.A.) The third volume of her autobiography, *The Lion's Mouth* (French translation by Pierre Leyris), is shortly to be published by Mercure de France, and a collection of recent poems, *The Presence*, is now with the Golgonooza Press.

**Jeremy Reed**, poet and novelist. His collection of poems, *At the Fisheries* was a Poetry Book Society recommendation, and is shortly to appear, with additional poems, in the Penguin series. *Nero* (poems) appeared in 1985 and he is completing a collection of essays on the mental stresses of certain imaginative poets, including Christopher Smart, John Clare, Hart Crane, Hopkins, Rilke and others, in relation to the writing of their poetry.

**Tom Scott**. Poet and historian of Scottish literature. He has translated into Lallans works of Villon, Dante and others. He has written both in English and in Lallans, but increasingly over the years in his native Scots language. Books at present in print are: *At the Shrine o the Unkent Sodger* (Arkos, 1968); *The Tree* (Borderline Press, Dunfermline, 1977); *The Dirty Business* (Luath Press, Barr, Ayrshire, forthcoming 1988); *Oxford Book of Scottish Verse* (OUP 1966) and the *Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*, 1970. He is at present engaged on a new long poem, *Myeloma*.

**Liadain Sherrard** obtained a double First at King's College, Cambridge, after which she studied at the Courtauld Institute. She lives now mostly in Greece (her mother's native country) and with her father, Philip Sherrard, has just

completed the translation of two works by Henry Corbin, *Temple and Contemplation* and the *History of Islamic Philosophy*. She is about to begin work on a translation of a work by René Guénon for the Islamic Texts Society.

**Östen Sjöstrand** (b. 1925) is a member of The Swedish Academy and edits the arts journal *Artes*. As poet, editor, translator and librettist he has contributed much to Swedish cultural life. A *Selected Poems* was published by Bonniers in 1981 and his latest collection is *Strax ovanför vattenlinjen* (*Just above the Water-Line*, 1984). Staffan Bergsten's study of his work was published by Twayne in 1974. A selection of his poetry in Robin Fulton's translation appeared from Oleander Press (Cambridge, U.K. and N.Y.) in 1975 and a larger selection is now ready.

**Philip Sherrard**, theologian and well-known authority on, and translator of, modern Greek poetry: Among his recent publications are the *Philokalia* (Translation, with G. E. H. Palmer and Kallistos Ware, Faber & Faber) and (with Edmund Keeley, *Selected Poems of Angelos Sikelianos* (Anvil Press and Princeton University Press). *The Rape of Man and Nature* (based on the Frederick Denison Maurice lecture, 1975, King's College, London) will be published in 1986 (Golgonooza Press and Lindisfarne Press).

**Andrew Staniland**, b.1959, grew up in Sheffield, studied at the University of Durham. Has lived mainly in London and worked in a variety of part-time jobs while concentrating on writing – mainly long narrative poems and verse-plays. Featured as a 'new poet' in *Orbis Magazine*, 1984.

**E. W. F. Tomlin** combined for many years service with the British Council (he was Cultural Counsellor and Representative in Turkey, Japan and France) and authorship. He has written a number of philosophical books, the last of which was entitled *Psyche, Culture and the New Science*, and also studies such as *Simone Weil*, *The World of St Boniface*, and *In Search of St Piran*. He has also published poetry and fiction. His two books on Western and Oriental Philosophy are now reissued in one volume (1986) by Oak Tree Books.

**Vernon Watkins**: Bibliography. (Note: most of the books listed are now out of print). *Ballad of the Mari Lwyd*, 1941, *The Lamp and the Veil*, 1945, *The Lady with the Unicorn*, 1948, *The Death Bell*, 1954, *The North Sea* (Translations of Heinrich Heine), 1955, *Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins*. Edited with an Introduction by Vernon Watkins, 1956, *Cypress and Acacia*, 1959, *Affinities*, 1962, *Fidelities*, 1968. All the foregoing were published or prepared by the author during his lifetime and published by Faber. *The Influences*, 1976, Bran's Head Books. *Elegy for the Latest Dead* (privately printed by Gwen Watkins, 1977), *Uncollected Poems*, Enitharmon Press, 1969, *The Breaking of the Wave* Golgonooza Press, 1979, *The Ballad of the Outer Dark* Enitharmon Press, 1979.

Vernon Watkins 1906–1967, edited by Leslie Norris, Faber, 1970, *Poetry Wales*, Vol. 12 no. 4 (Vernon Watkins number) Spring 1977), *Taliesin a Gower: su una poesie de Vernon Watkins*. Roberto Sanesi, (Sandro Maria Rosso, 1975). *Vernon Watkins* (writers of Wales Series) University of Wales Press, 1974; *Vernon Watkins and the Springs of Vision* by Dora Polk, Christopher Davies, Swansea, 1977. A paper on Vernon Watkins is included in *Defending Ancient Springs*, Kathleen Raine, 1967, reissued by Golgonooza Press 1986.

**Peter Lamborn Wilson** was editor of *Sophia Perennis*, journal of the Royal Iranian Academy of Philosophy, of whom H. R. Nasr, Toshihiko Izutsu and Henry Corbin were Directors. He has translated Persian poetry and has published two volumes of his own verse. His book on the iconography of the Angel was published by Thames and Hudson (1980). He now lives in New York.

**V. S. Yanovsky** was born in Russia (1906) was educated at the Sorbonne and went to U.S.A. in 1942 (naturalized 1947). He has a medical practice in New York State and published his first novel when he was over sixty, *No Man's Time* (1967) with an introduction by W. H. Auden. He has since published *Of Light and Sounding Brass* (Novel) 1972; *The Dark Fields of Venus: From a Doctor's Logbook* (1973) *The Great Transfer* (novel) 1974; *Medicine, Science and Life* (1978); *Elysian Fields: A Book of Memory* (1986). He writes: 'Literature, art, science, religion and philosophy seek to make the invisible reality visible, though with different means . . . Partial revelations are always, at first, unacceptable to most contemporaries.' His 'essential theme', he writes, 'Thy Kingdom come and next Thy will be done. (This is perhaps a heresy)'.



